ソードアート・オンライン
アリシゼーション・インベーディング
15
川原 礫
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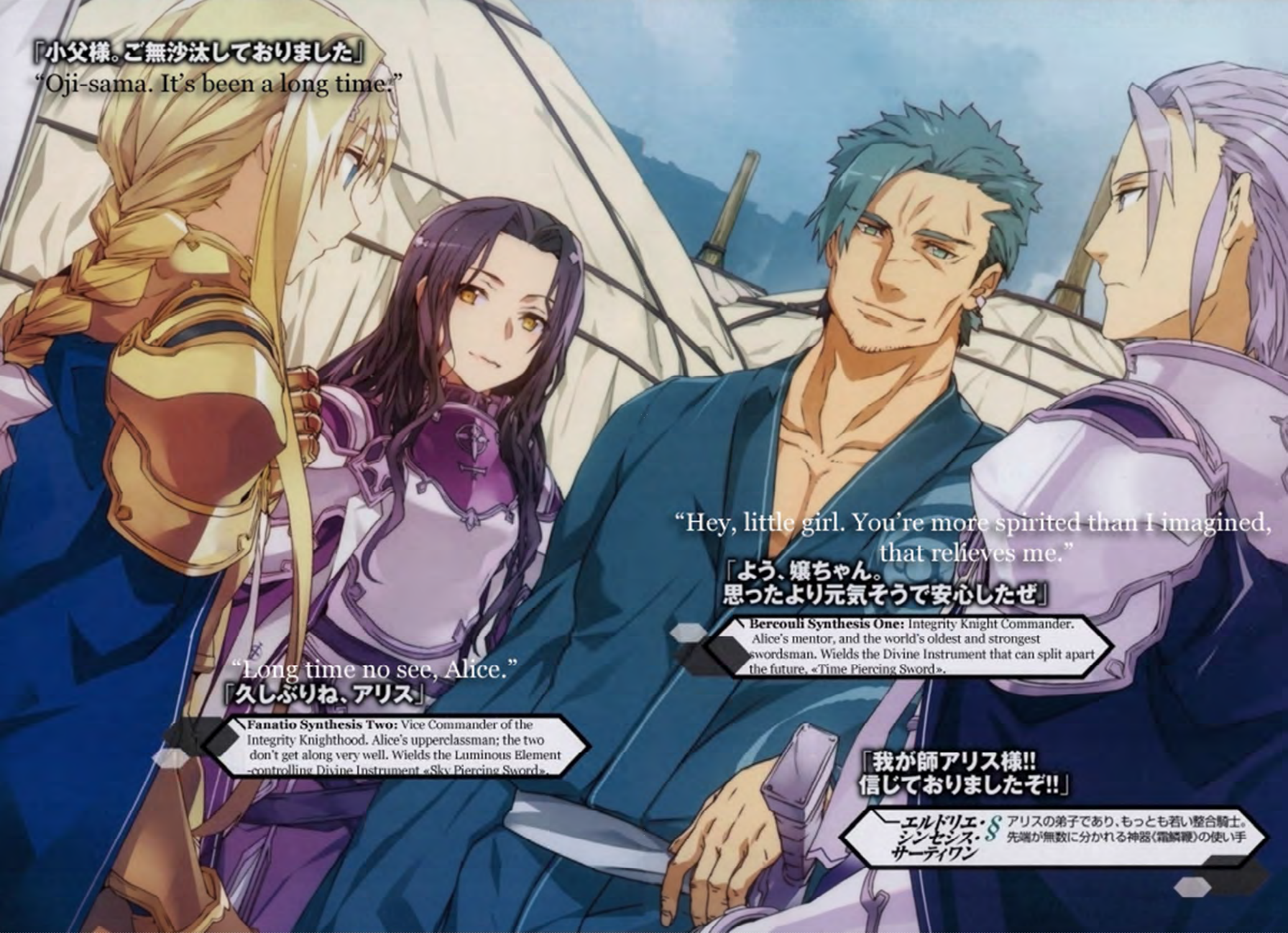
SWORD ART ONLINE
電撃文庫

SWORD ART ONLINE
015
REKI KAWAHARA abec bee-pee
SWORD ART ONLINE
Alicization invading

"...This is the world that you protected, Kirito."
「……あなたが守った世界よ、キリト」
Alice Synthesis Thirty: Originally an Integrity Knight under «Administrator», she broke the Seal of her Right Eye after meeting Kirito, and awoke as a true artificial intelligence «Alice».
"……"
「……」
Kirito: A boy who dove into the virtual world Underworld. To escape, he reached the top floor of the «Central Cathedral», and sank into a state of loss of consciousness after an intense battle with the Highest Minister «Administrator».

Lilpin: Tribal Chief of the Orcs
Iskahn: Tenth Generation Chair of the Fist Fighter Guild
D.I.L.: Leader of the Dark Sorceress Guild
Shasta: Dark Knight Commander
Siglosig: Tribal Chief of the Giants
Fer Za: Leader of the Assassin Guild
"Lift your heads, and report your names.
–Starting over there."
「顔を上げ、名乗るがいい。
――右端の、お前からだ」
Emperor Vector: A Chief Technology Officer (CTO) of an American military corporation who used the super-account «Emperor Vector» to login to the Underworld on the Dark Territory's side, and began a battle to seize the first man-made artificial intelligence «Alice» .


「小父様。ご無沙汰しておりました」
"Oji-sama. It's been a long time."
"Hey, little girl. You're more spirited than I imagined, that relieves me."
「よう、嬢ちゃん。
思ったより元気そうで安心したぜ」
Bercouli Synthesis One: Integrity Knight Commander. Alice's mentor, and the world's oldest and strongest swordsman. Wields the Divine Instrument that can split apart the future, «Time Piercing Sword».
"Long time no see, Alice."
「久しぶりね、アリス」
Fanatio Synthesis Two: Vice Commander of the Integrity Knighthood. Alice's upperclassman; the two don't get along very well. Wields the Luminous Element -controlling Divine Instrument «Sky Piercing Sword».
「我が師アリス様!!
信じておりましたぞ!!」
エルドリエ・シンセシス・サーティワン
アリスの弟子であり、もっとも若い整合騎士。
先端が無数に分かれる神器〈霜鱗鞭〉の使い手

≪アンダーワールド≫全図

≪ラースのロゴマーク

闇の土地≪ダーク・テリトリー≫が≪人界≫をぐるりと取り囲む形で構成される≪アンダーワールド≫。
その全景は、≪プロジェクト・アリシゼーション≫を偽装するための民間企業≪ラース≫のロゴマークの形を模している。
ロゴは大小ギアと駆動ベルト、同時に豚の鼻をモチーフにしている。
この意匠をアンダーワールド地図に重ねると、帝城オブシディアが動力ギアとなり、碾き臼である人界を回す暗喩になっていることがわかる。

イラスト／来栖達也

Chapter 14 - Subtilizer (The One Who Steals Souls)

Chapter 14
Subtilizer

June ~ July AD 2026
A sniper with light blue hair.

The slender frame of the girl formed a strange harmony with the gigantic fifty caliber rifle.

I could not see her face as she laid in the prone position with her back to me. However, it must be as imposing as a lynx, adorned with beautiful features.

Her concentration was worthy of praise, aiming below without the slightest quiver, her right eye pressed against the scope and her index finger touching the trigger. I would love to continue gazing upon her from behind for a little more, but I had little time left too.

Leaving my concealed shelter, I began walking across the ruined building's floor. Cautiously avoiding the pebbles, wood chips, and metal scraps, those small objects scattered about my feet, I drew near the girl's back in perfect silence.

The girl's back abruptly jerked.

Did she sense something that made neither noise nor vibration? That intuition was marvelous, but unfortunately, it was too late.

My extended right arm twisted around her slender neck as my left hand pinned her head down from the back.

They constricted her with quiet yet clear intent.

The «Army Combative» skill showed its results; the girl's visible life–her HP bar–began falling rapidly. The sniper squirmed desperately, but in this VRMMO game, «Gun Gale Online», it was near impossible to escape from a successful rear choke, while barehanded without a significant difference in STR. That was no different from the real world, however.

Chapter 14 - Subtilizer (The One Who Steals Souls)

I had predicted that this sniper with light blue hair, whom I had most looked forward to fighting... no, hunting down among the twenty-nine participants of this tournament named «Bullet of Bullets», would try sniping from above in this five-story building.

The problem was, the main street on this map was within range from both the fourth and fifth floors. I needed to swiftly decide which floor to ambush her on.

Logically, she would choose the fourth floor where she could prepare to snipe quicker. However, my intuition and judgement whispered to me the moment I saw the library on the fourth floor. My intuition told me that sniper was likely still a young student in the real world. My judgement told me a student might avoid a library that would bring up memories of real life.

That prediction was spot-on. The sniper with light blue hair wasted tens of seconds needlessly ascending that one floor and showed herself on the fifth floor's warehouse.

And now, her transient life would dissolve like that of a butterfly that went astray into a spider's web.

Aah, if only this was not a mere reduction of binary data in the virtual world, but the deprivation of an actual life and soul.

If only it was a live body squirming in my arm instead of an avatar.

«That moment» would truly be ever so sweet.

The sniper's HP shown at the top-right of my vision cut through the five percent mark. But the girl continued struggling in desperation to escape from the choke.

Even as her enemy, I felt her stance precious, trying her best despite her certain defeat, neither letting out useless utterances nor turning limp in resignation.

While I embraced the girl tight, like a loved one, my mouth drew closer to her ear from behind and whispered.

–Your soul will be so sweet.

Chapter 14 - Subtilizer (The One Who Steals Souls)

1

He slowly raised his eyelids.

It seemed he had fallen asleep unaware. The sofa of Italian make he brought in last week was apparently too soft. With his body still engulfed in the supple leather, he glanced at the smartwatch on his left wrist.

Afternoon, two-twenty.

Getting up, he gently straightened up his back while walking closer to the glass wall in the south. As its entire surface was switchable glass and presently transparent, it permitted an unbroken view of the waterfront from this executive room on the forty-third floor.

The harbor quietly glittered in the illumination from the neighboring skyscrapers. Numerous large ships were moored at the long wharf.

These intimidating silhouettes with their sharp edges were not of luxurious cruisers. They were the warships of the Third Fleet under the United States Pacific Fleet.

San Diego, California's second city, had long been its base. The economy circled around the gigantic naval base where over twenty-five thousand affiliated to the military resided.

However, new industry sectors experienced a boom in recent years. High-tech industries dealing with information, communication, bio-technology, and such.

And there were those corporations who fused military affairs with high technology as well. Primarily entrusted with security services and training by the military, large companies, and other related sectors, these so-called private military companies even deploy manpower to fight directly on the front lines.

Gabriel Miller, the chief technology officer of «Glowgen Defense Systems» that had its headquarters in Downtown San Diego, gazed down upon the port's night view and revealed an unconscious smile.

Chapter 14 - Subtilizer (The One Who Steals Souls)

The dream he saw in his short nap earlier was invigorating, however slight.

A dream of a full-dive game's event that he had participated in days ago in this executive room.

Gabriel rarely dreamed, but whenever he did, it would be a detailed recount of some scene in his past.

The exhilarating sensations of that light blue haired sniper's desperate struggle still remained in his arms. As if it was no dream, but reality…

No, that was off. That battle happened not in reality, but in the virtual world.

Full-dive technology was a marvelous invention. Praises to its inventor, *Akihiko Kayaba*. He would have been headhunted if he was still alive, even if it took millions of dollars. Even if he was the worst criminal of the century—no, precisely because he was such a person.
However, while the experiences brought about by the AmuSphere became increasingly lifelike, the inadequacy felt from the realization that they were fake became all that stronger. Like how one's thirst could not be satiated with salt water, no matter how much one drank.

As the youngest among Glowgen DS's staff and a major stockholder, Gabriel led his life without worries over his material needs. However, money could not fulfill that craving he held deep in his heart.

"*…Your soul will be so sweet…*"
He voiced out the words uttered in his dreams once more.

He wanted to whisper that in Japanese which he had been studying since three years ago. But they must have thought him American with that US tag on his HP bar and he had to avoid leaving them an impression stronger than necessary. There would be opportunities to speak at length eventually. He would leave his many questions for then.

Wiping off the faint smile that emerged on his lips without his notice, Gabriel touch the various touch sensors embedded on the window and increased its opacity. Upon which the darkened glass projected himself.

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His loose, blonde hair was swept back, with his eyes blue. His 6 feet, 1 inch body was covered by a white dress shirt and dark grey slacks. His shoes were cordovan, custom-made. It was almost the very image of the white establishment, embarrassingly enough, but Gabriel saw no more reason for his appearance than a means for others to identify him. At the end of the day, the flesh is nothing more than a hull for the soul.

The soul.

Almost all religions adopted some notion of the soul. Of course, Christianity advocated that the soul would be sent to heaven or hell upon death dependent on one's actions in life. However, it was neither due to Protestantism nor Catholicism that Gabriel believed in the existence of the soul and sought it out.

It was a fact. One personally witnessed, visually.

That cluster of light, beautiful beyond compare, soaring from the girl's forehead the moment she met her demise in his arms.

Gabriel Miller was born in the district of Pacific Palisades in the suburbs of Los Angeles, California, in March, 1998.
He had no siblings and he grew up engulfed in love from his affluent parents, both emotionally and financially. The mansion he lived in was grand and there was no end to his playgrounds, but what the young Gabriel loved most was his father's collection storage.

His father, the owner and manager of Glowgen Securities, the predecessor of Glowgen Defense Systems, had the hobby of collecting insect specimens and countless glass cases lined the vast storage. Gabriel would seclude himself in there when he found time, viewing the multicolored insects with a magnifying glass in a hand and immersing himself in absentminded fantasies as he sat on the sofa in the middle of the room.

Curious, deep emotions assailed the young Gabriel at times when he was alone in that dim room with its high ceiling, surrounded by tens of thousands of mute insects.

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Every one of these insects lived up until a certain moment. In the grasslands of Africa, the deserts of the Middle East, the jungles of South America, they energetically made their nests and hunted for food.

However, they were caught by a harvester at some point, treated with chemicals, and exchanged hands numerous times through commerce before neatly arranged in these glass cases at the Millers. In other words, while this room was a collection room of insect specimens, it was also a gigantic cemetery filled with tens of thousands of massacred corpses...

Gabriel lowered his eyelids and imagined what would happen if the insects around suddenly came back to life.

Their six legs would desperately scrape the air, their haptic perception and wings quivering. The myriad buzzes overlapping and surging towards Gabriel as parched ripples.

Buzz, buzz.

His eyelids flashed open. The legs of the green rhinoceros beetle fixed in the corner of the case before him seemed to move; he leapt off the sofa. He rushed over to the case, absorbed in the sight, but the insect was a lifeless specimen once more by the time he reached.

Its carapace, legs with sharp thorns growing over them, and compound eyes that resembled a miniscule mesh were emerald green and as glossy as metal. Gabriel pondered on exactly what once powered that delicate body, granting it mobility.

His father told him that insects lacked a brain like that of humans. He asked, how did they think then, and his father showed him a certain video.

It captured praying mantises in the act of mating. The small male had held down the plump female from her back, their reproductive organs joined. The female remained motionless for a moment, but then abruptly grasped the male's upper body with her two scythes, crunched down on his head, and began feeding without any prior warning. The male persisted in his mating even while Gabriel watched on

in shock, finally withdrawing his reproductive organ once his head had been utterly devoured. The female then shook her scythes and fled at once, as fast as she could.

Despite the complete lack of its head, the male praying mantis walked along the grass blade, up a branch, and mechanically continued its escape. His father spoke while pointing at the clip.

The nerves spread over the entire bodies of insects, including praying mantises, served a purpose similar to a brain. Hence, they could live for some time even after they lost their head which was no more than a sensory organ.

Gabriel spent the several days after he watched that video wondering exactly where praying mantises had their souls then. If they could live on even with their heads eaten, losing all of their legs should be of no particular issue. Then perhaps their abdomen? Or their chest? But even with their soft abdomen crushed or their chests pierced through by a pin, insects would continue struggling for a time, their legs squirming vigorously.

If they did not die immediately no matter which part of their body they lost, could it be that the praying mantis's soul was faintly spread out through its entire body? Eight or nine years old then, Gabriel concluded so after numerous experiments conducted on the insects he caught around his home.

The soul, that mysterious power that moved these partially mechanical beings known as insects, stubbornly remained within them no matter which part of their body was demolished. But it would consider it a lost cause and surrender after a certain point, deserting its vessel.

Gabriel fervently desired to see that fleeing soul, and to capture it if possible. However, he couldn't even see «that something» slipping out from the insects' bodies, let alone capture it, no matter how hard he stared into the magnifying glass, no matter how carefully he carried out his experiments. His modest wish showed no results even after spending much time and zeal in the secret laboratory he made deep in the dense forest behind his mansion.

The young Gabriel instinctively knew his wish would not be agreeable to his parents. That was why he made no further questions in a similar vein to his father

after that one praying mantis incident and made sure to divulge nothing about his experiments. But his desires seemed to heighten with his attempts to keep them under wrap.

Gabriel had a friend of the same age with whom he was on extremely good terms back then.

The girl was named Alicia Klingerman and the only daughter of the entrepreneurs living in the mansion erected on the adjacent plot of land. They attended the same elementary school and got along well, as did their families. She was shy and obedient, preferring to read books or watch videos at home than to play until muddy outside.

Naturally, Gabriel hid his secret experiments from Alicia and spoke nothing of insects and souls.

Nevertheless, he couldn't stop thinking about it. Gabriel's imagination pondered, time after time, where Alicia's soul could be as he quietly peered into her face from the side while she smiled like an angel, absorbed in reading her novels.

Insects were different from humans. Humans could not live on without their heads. Thus, a human's soul should be in their head... in their brain.

But Gabriel had already learnt that brain damage did not lead directly to loss of life via the internet on his father's computer. There was a construction laborer who survived with a thick iron pipe piercing in from the chin and out the head; there was a doctor who tried to cure mental illness by ablating a portion of a patient's brain.

So, was it somewhere in the brain? Gabriel wondered so as he looked at Alicia's brow, fringed by her fluffy blonde hair. Alicia's soul lay hidden beyond that smooth skin, beyond that hard skull, and beyond even those soft brain tissues.

He would definitely end up marrying Alicia, or so the Gabriel childishly envisioned. Then he might get the chance to see Alicia's soul with his own eyes one day. Words couldn't possibly describe how beautiful the soul of the angelic Alicia was.

Half of Gabriel's wish was granted, sooner than he ever expected.

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In September 2008, widespread bank failures pulled the trigger to the Global Financial Crisis.
The waves of recession swallowed even Pacific Palisades on the suburbs of Los Angeles. A great number of stately mansions were offered for sale and the number of high class automobiles driving down the streets visibly fell.

It was fortunate Glowgen Securities had solid administration and managed to restrain the effects to a minimum, but the corporation managed by the neighbors, the Klingermans, fell under heavy debt as their investments were in real estate. With their fortunes, including the mansion, gone by April the next year, they decided to depend on their kin who worked in agriculture and move to Kansas City far in the Midwest.

It saddened Gabriel. Intelligent beyond his years as a child aged ten, he understood he could not help Alicia as a ten-year-old child and could clearly imagine what severe circumstances she would face from now on.

A mansion guarded by flawless security, a skilled cook to prepare each day's meals, and a school filled with affluent white children; these privileges would vanish from Alicia's life forever, replaced by poverty and manual labor. And what Gabriel couldn't stand most, was how Alicia's soul, which should have been his one day, would be hurt by some unknown person and lose its brilliance.

So, he thought to kill her.

On the day Alicia said her farewells at school, Gabriel invited her to the forest behind his home after she got off the school bus home. Deftly dodging every security camera set up along the road and fences, he ensured no one was looking while he entered the forest and walked over fallen leaves to avoid leaving any tracks, guiding Alicia to his «secret laboratory» surrounded by thick scrubs. Utterly unaware of the countless insects that had died there, Alicia immediately returned the gesture when Gabriel wrapped his arms around her slender form.

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With soft sobs, Alicia mentioned how she didn't want to go anywhere else, how she wanted to live on in this district with Gabe forever.

Whispering that he would grant her that wish in his heart, Gabriel stuck his right hand into his shirt pocket and took out the tool he prepared in advance. What his father had used to deal with the insects: a four inch needle made from steel with a wooden grip.

Gently inserting the sharp point into Alicia's left ear, he first held her right ear with his left hand before penetrating through to its base without the slightest hesitation.

Alicia blinked her two eyes, not comprehending what had happened, before her body underwent violent convulsions. Her open blue eyes abruptly lost their focus seconds later, and—

Gabriel saw **that**.
Something like a small cloud, glittering brightly, appeared from the middle of Alicia's smooth forehead. That drifted, airily, as it approached Gabriel's brow and entered, just like that, without any resistance whatsoever.

The fine sunlight of that spring afternoon that had engulfed his surroundings disappeared. It seemed as though rays of white light had descended through the branches of those tall trees; he could hear even faint chimes.

Tears poured from Gabriel's eyes from the inexpressible exaltation. He was now looking upon Alicia's soul… that was not all, he could see even what Alicia's soul could, that was what Gabriel's instincts told him.

The small, glittering cloud passed through Gabriel's head in several seconds that felt like an eternity and continued on its ascent, as though guided by the light from the skies, before vanishing at last. The spring sunshine and the chirps from small birds returned to his surroundings.

Hugging onto Alicia's body, with both its life and soul now absent, Gabriel pondered on whether that earlier experience was reality or a hallucination brought about by overwhelming stimulation. And knew that no matter which it was, he would spend the rest of his life in pursuit of what he had just seen.

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He threw Alicia's corpse into a deep pit that opened up at the roots of a giant oak spotted earlier. Next, after a careful inspection of his own body, he pinched up two strands of blonde hair stuck on himself and tossed those into the hole as well. The needle was washed clean before returned to his father's toolbox.

Not even the local police's earnest investigation found any clue to the Alicia Klingerman Disappearance Incident and the case eventually went cold.

Having awoken from his short and deep recollection, the twenty-eight years old Gabriel Miller took his sight off himself, reflected in the mirrored glass, and walked to his work desk by the wall in the west. The moment he sat on reclining chair made in Norway, a phone icon lit up on the thirty inch display panel embedded on the desk's glass surface.
With a tap, it showed his female secretary's face while her voice flowed out.

[Mister Miller, I apologize for disturbing your rest. COO Ferguson had requested for you to accompany him for dinner tomorrow. How shall I reply?]

"Tell him I have prior plans."

Gabriel immediately replied and his usually collected secretary showed a somewhat troubled expression. The COO was the executive vice-president after all, the second-in-command at Glowgen DS. As one among the over ten officers, Gabriel could hardly afford to turn down this invitation for a meal—normally.

However, his secretary's bewildered expression vanished before a second passed and her calm voice continued.

[Understood. I will do as you say.]

The call ended, and Gabriel sank deep into the chair with his legs crossed.

He could guess at what Ferguson wanted. It must have been to stop Gabriel from participating in that particular «operation» he had already scheduled.

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But the COO must think otherwise inside. That old fox must be wishing for him to nonchalantly set off to some dangerous place to earn a spot on the KIA list. After all, Gabriel was the previous president's own child and the majority shareholder.

Of course, Gabriel himself was aware of how foolish it would be for an officer to participate in an operation where live bullets flew about. Even if he did have prior experience, a CTO's job was to plan out the entire operation from the safety of the main office without any need to expose himself to the dangers of the battlefield.

However, no matter the costs, he had to participate in this operation that had to be kept under complete and utter secrecy. After all, it was an issue related to what Gabriel had staked his life to seek out ever since that day he saw Alicia's soul.

The operation's client was not the Department of Defense regardless how they would benefit. It was the National Security Agency—the NSA—with whom they had few prior dealings with.

The two NSA agents who visited this room a month ago managed to surprise Gabriel, who could hardly claim to be emotional, numerous times.

Firstly, the operation was completely unlawful. After all, a combat team from Glowgen would board a navy submarine and launch an assault on a warship belonging to Japan, an allied nation. There was no need to concern themselves over any fatal casualties of that ship's crew either.

And the objective of the operation was to steal a certain technology.

Upon hearing the details, Gabriel's voice leaked out slightly, overwhelmed by surprise—or perhaps delight. It was fortunate the agents did not notice, however.

«Soul TransLation technology». A wondrous machine capable of deciphering humans' souls developed by a small organization called «Rath» in the JDSF.

Gabriel had held a strong interest in the full-dive technology born in Japan for some time now in his pursuit of souls. That was why he fought with the players from Japan in Gun Gale Online and studied Japanese. He even obtained a set of the «demonic device», the Nerve Gear, that should have been disposed of without a

single one remaining by spending several tens of thousands of dollars—of course, he didn't intend to use it himself, however.

Gabriel expected development on full-dive technology to wane due to the commotion caused by that death game. However, they had quietly continued their research and finally drew near the secrets of the human soul.

The request from NSA felt like destiny to Gabriel.

Glowgen DS might be one of the larger private military companies around, but that was all they were; they could hardly decline the NSA who now held even more power than the CIA in the first place. The vote for the contract was passed with a lead of two in the emergency board meeting. To prevent information from leaking, it was decided that the combat team would consist of contract employees specializing in wet work with their own dark histories to cover up—

Gabriel volunteered himself as the operation commander.

Naturally, the fact that Gabriel was an officer in Glowgen was hidden from the combat team. Those people would likely betray the company at the drop of a hat if they knew, abducting Gabriel for a ransom.

Gabriel had to go even with such risks.

The NSA agents mentioned. That Rath had succeeded in not just deciphering the human soul, but also cloning it through STL technology. That if that artificial soul given the codename «A.L.I.C.E.» was completed and loaded onto Japanese unmanned weapons, it would destroy the military balance in East Asia.

He didn't care if disputes arose in the Far East—or anywhere else in the world. But Gabriel was convinced the moment he heard the name Alice.

He would make that his own.

He would procure that small media storage device, known as the light cube, with that soul on board at all costs.

"Alice..... Alicia....."

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Leaning against the chair with its back down, he softly murmured the two names. A faint smile appeared on his lips without his notice.

The name of the company established by Gabriel's father, Glowgen, was coined together with the meaning of «bringing forth light». It seemed his father had the light of happiness in mind, but what came to mind for Gabriel, his successor, was no other than that golden brilliance drifting out from the dying Alicia's brow.

Bringing forth light. Or the soul, in other words.

It was fate, all of it.

Gabriel and the eleven in the combat team would fly to Guam a week later and invade Japanese waters on a nuclear submarine from a naval base there. Before the operation began, they would switch to a small submarine onboard and carry out an assault on the objective, the giant ocean research mother ship, «Ocean Turtle».

They might occupy it without shedding blood, or with casualties resulting on either side—or perhaps both, even. Still, Gabriel's beliefs were unshaken. He knew he would get his hands on «Alice» and the STL technology. He just needed a simple copy of the light cube and documents from the NSA.

A little longer... it was just a little longer. He would grasp the true essence of the soul that eluded him despite his multiple experiments on other humans, since Alicia, in just a little longer.

He would be able to see that beautiful, gleaming cloud once again.

"……Your soul... will be so sweet……"

Gabriel whispered once more, this time in Japanese, and shut his eyelids.

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2

Captain Dario Giuliani who commanded the Seawolf-class nuclear submarine, Jimmy Carter, was a submariner down to his bones, rising to his current position from cleaning the torpedo tubes. The first he rode was an antique Barbel-class diesel vessel where the stench of oil and noise followed along no matter where one went in her stiflingly cramp space.

In comparison, the Seawolf-class that cost more than any other submarine in the world was practically a Rolls-Royce. Giuliani had showered the ship and her crew with love ever since he was appointed as her captain in 2020. Through tough training, the high yield strength steel hull, her S6W reactor, and the hundred and forty crew members were bonded like a single being, capable of swimming as she liked in any ocean as long as it had the depth.

Jimmy Carter was practically Giuliani's daughter. It was a pity he had to step down from active duty soon, forced to either work on land or an early retirement, but the successor he recommended, the executive officer, Guthrie, would definitely command the ship brilliantly.

Nonetheless—

As though to disgrace Giuliani's last years, a single, curiously perilous order was handed down a mere ten days ago.

Jimmy Carter was a ship planned for support on special operations and possessed a variety of methods to cooperate with the SEALs. The midget submarine (ASDS) carried on its afterdeck was one among those.

There were countless times she cruised deep in foreign waters with those from the SEALs aboard. But the objective was always for keeping the peace of the states or the world and those men on board definitely felt the same sense of duty as Giuliani's subordinates as they went into the jaws of death.

However, as for that bunch who boarded from Guam two days ago—

Giuliani went to see the faces of his guests at the rear section only once, but that was enough for him to get on the verge of ordering his subordinates to kick them

out into the deep sea. The tens of men lay down on the floor without any sense of order, some blared noise from their headphones while others made merry, gambling over card games; not to mention the empty cans of beer scattered everywhere. There were no proper seamen in that bunch. It was doubtful they were even from the military.

There was only one who seemed to have some notion of courtesy, that tall commanding officer who apologized to Giuliani for their disturbance in order.

However, that man with those shockingly blue eyes—

While holding the right hand he offered and meeting his eyes, Giuliani tasted a sensation he had forgotten for a long time.

That was from, yes, long before he entered the navy. He was swimming in the ocean at Miami, his homeland, when a giant great white raced straight past his side. He was fortunately unharmed, but Giuliani saw that shark's eyes right before him. Those eyes devoured all light like a bottomless pit.

That same hollowness extended out deep within that man's eyes…

"Captain, a reading from the bow sonar!"

The sudden noise from the sonar technician pulled Giuliani out from his thoughts.

"It's the turbine from a reactor, we're matching now… it matches, it's definitely the target mega-float. Fifteen miles."

Bringing his mind back, he quickly gave instructions from the combat command post, the captain's seat.

"Right, keep this depth and drop her speed to fifteen knots."

The order was echoed and he felt an instant of deceleration.

"Where's that Aegis-equipped escort ship?"

"There's a gas turbine sound confirmed three miles west-southwest of the target… matching done, it's the JMSDF's Nagato.

Giuliani stared hard at the two light points shown on the large display in front.

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Putting aside from the Aegis-equipped warship, he heard the mega-float was an oceanic research ship without any arms. And the order this time was to let those armed thugs invade that. Not to mention how it was a ship from Japan, an allied nation. It hardly seemed like a legitimate operation with the approval of the President and Secretary of Defense.

The words from those men in black suits who brought the directive directly from the Pentagon resurfaced in Giuliani's mind.

—Japan is conducting research on that mega-float for reigniting war on the states. There is no choice but to bury that research in order to maintain the friendship between our two countries.

Giuliani was no youngling capable of eating up their words at face value.

Still, he was already old enough to understand he had no choice but to obey those orders.

"Are our guests prepared?"

The executive officer standing at his side confirmed in a deep voice.

"They are standing by in the ASDS."

"Alright… maintain this speed and bring her up to a hundred feet!"

Compressed air pushed the ocean water out from the ballast tank and the produced buoyancy lifted Jimmy Carter's gigantic frame. The distance from the light points gently yet surely decreased.

Would there be casualties among the Japanese researchers? That seemed likely. He would probably carry the memory of cooperating in such an operation until his deathbed.

"Five miles to the objective!"

Shaking off his hesitation, Giuliani commanded with resolution.

"Release the ASDS!"

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The faint vibrations his body felt conveyed the release of their baggage from the afterdeck.

“Release complete… ASDS self-propulsion initiated.”

The submarine with a pack of stray dogs and a single shark aboard accelerated in the blink of an eye and charged straight into the belly of that giant ocean turtle floating atop the ocean.

Chapter 15 - *In Northern Lands*

Chapter 15

In Northern Lands
10th Month of Human World Calendar 380

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Placing the dishes she finished washing on the dish drainer, Alice Synthesis Thirty wiped her hands on the hem of her apron as she flicked her face up.

The treetops visible beyond the small glass window had lost quite a number of leaves, dyed in red and yellow, to the chill of recent days. The arrival of winter was indeed earlier when compared to Central Capital Centoria.

Still, the rays of Solus pouring down from the skies, blue for the first time in a while, seemed warm. A pair of Treeclimbing Rabbits huddled together on a thick branch of the tree straight ahead, apparently enjoying their sunbath.

Alice smiled as she gazed at them for a while before she turned about and spoke.

"Hey, we seem to be having fine weather today, so how about we have lunch all the way at the eastern hills?"

No one replied.

The log cabin had only two rooms, and this one served as the living room, dining room, and kitchen with a plain wood table placed right in its middle.

Seated on one of the chairs, similarly plain, was a black-haired youth. Not even raising his head at Alice's call, his vacant stare stayed upon a single spot atop the table.

He never did have much meat on him, but still, he was obviously more slender than even Alice now. His bony frame was visible even with the loose robe he had on. The empty right sleeve hanging down languidly from the tip of his shoulders only made him look all the more tragic.

Light was absent from his eyes, jet-black like his hair. Those two eyes reflected no more than his locked heart.

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Suppressing the pain in her chest that she could never ever get used to, Alice continued in a cheerful voice.

"It might be a little windy, so it might be best to dress up thick. One moment, I shall prepare them at once."

After removing her apron and hanging it off the hook beside the sink, she turned towards the bedroom next door.

Bundling her long, blonde hair behind, she wrapped a cotton scarf around herself. Along with a faded black patch around her right eye that still lacked light. She first put on one of the woollen overcoats arranged on the wall, then returned to the living room with the other under her arm.

The black-haired youth made no movement at all. After prompting him on by placing her hands on his skinny back, he eventually stood from the chair in an awkward motion.

However, that was all the youth was capable of; he could not walk even a single mel. Putting the overcoat on from behind him, she went around to his front and tied the leather strap near his neck tight.

"You can do it, keep them up for a little longer."

Saying so, she ran over to the corner of the room.

A tough chair made from bright light brown wood was left there. Instead of four legs, it had two pairs of iron wheels attached, one large and one small. It was crafted by an elderly man by the name of Garitta who lived deep in the forest in solitude.

Holding onto the grips attached to the back of that wheelchair, she rolled it over to behind the youth. Sitting him down on the leather seat as his body swayed perilously, she then tightly covered his two legs with a thick lap blanket.

"There! Shall we make a move, then?"

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She patted the youth's shoulders, grasped the grips, and was about to wheel the wheelchair towards the door located south of the room.

The youth abruptly turned his face and reached his quivering left hand towards the eastern wall.

"Aah... aah."

That deep, coarse voice was unintelligible. However, Alice immediately guessed what the youth desired.

"Ah, I'm sorry. I will fetch them right away."

Three swords sat on sturdy metal fittings on the wall the youth stretched his hand towards.

On the right was Alice's «Fragrant Olive Sword».

On the left was the jet-black long sword the youth once carried on his waist, the «Night Sky Sword».

And in the middle was a pure-white long sword that lacked a master to call its own, the «Blue Rose Sword».

Alice first removed the Night Sky Sword, almost as heavy as the Fragrant Olive Sword, from the wall and held it under her left arm.

Next, she lifted the Blue Rose Sword as well. Its weight reached only half or so of the black sword's. After all, it had lost more than half of the blade in its sheath.

And the owner of this sword, that flaxen-haired youth who was this youth's best friend, too, was no longer around...

She shut her eye for a moment and held onto both swords as she returned to the wheelchair. Upon gently laying them onto his lap, the youth placed his left hand on them before his face fell once more. He could express his own intentions through voice and motion only when seeking out those black and white swords.

"Be sure to keep a firm hold on them or they will drop."

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Alice told him while holding back the ache in her chest that had not lessened despite the months that passed. Pushing the now heavier wheelchair, they went out through the door.

A thick plank lay across the distance from the porch to the ground in the place of steps. Upon descending into the garden from there, a soft, cool breeze and the gentle sunlight enveloped the pair.

The log cabin was built deep within the thick forest, in a wide meadow. Alice personally cut, stripped, and assembled the wood it used. It was not much to look at, but its structure was sturdy as only trees with high priorities were used. She had to put up with the countless comments from the elderly Garitta, who taught her the method from scratch, about how he had never seen a girl with such strength, however.

This meadow was apparently where Alice and Eugeo had their secret playground when they were still children. Unfortunately, she had no memories of that time whatsoever. All memories from before she became an integrity knight were plundered through the «Synthesis Ritual».

She told the elderly Garitta and the villagers that she lost all of her past memories, but offered no reason. But in truth, her current self—Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty—was no more than a temporary personality dwelling in the body of the one born and raised on this land, Alice Schuberg. She felt obligated to return it if she could, but the memories of the original Alice had departed from this world alongside Eugeo.

"...Now, let us go."

Alice let out her voice to shake off that moment of contemplation and moved the wheelchair on, out from the front of the residence.

Nearly all of the meadow, circular with a diameter of thirty mel, was covered in cushy undergrowth, but an abundance of withered grass lay stacked up in a section in its east. It appeared like the nest of a gigantic creature—or rather, it truly was—but the master of that nest was absent. She gave it a glance and pondered where it

could have went to play today while exiting from the small path heading northwest from the meadow into the forest.

The road split into the east and west fifty mel ahead. A village named Rulid was in the west, but she had no desire to visit without purpose. Entering the eastern path, she set out while stepping through the filtered sunlight sparkling on the ground.

She slowly continued through the forest progressing from the season of autumn leaves to that of fallen leaves with the tenth month soon meeting its end.

"Are you cold?"

She called out to the youth but received no reply. He would say nothing even if plunged into a blizzard of intense cold. She looked over his shoulder and confirmed the overcoat's collar was closed tightly.

Of course, warming themselves would be easy if she generated a thermal element or two. However, there were villagers who viewed them with suspicion, so she preferred to refrain from having rumors about her abuse of sacred arts spread.

After walking for about fifteen minutes while carving furrows into the beaten path anew, the path ahead brightened up. A slightly elevated hill showed up in front after leaving the grove of trees. The road gradually became uphill, but still, Alice pushed the wheelchair on without difficulty.

The view instantly opened up after reaching the top of the hill.

Straight to the east was the blue surface of Lake Ruhr. And the extensive marshes deep within it. The forest continued indefinitely to the south.

A look to the north revealed the «mountain range at the edge», covered in pure white snow, towering as though to pierce through the sky. The days she easily flew over those peaks astride her flying dragon seemed like a distant dream now.

She did long to look upon the beautiful landscape with both eyes. The abundant energy in the earth and sun here should be capable of healing the right eye she lost

on the outer wall of the Central Cathedral. However, she had no desire yet to eliminate only her own injury through sacred arts.

After all, the youth's hollow eyes could only continue their vacant stare towards mid-air even with the late-autumn scenery endlessly spreading out before him.

Sitting down by the wheelchair, Alice leaned against the large wheel.

"How beautiful. More so than any of those art pieces hung on the cathedral's walls."

She called out the youth's name with a smile.

"...This is the world you protected, Kirito."

A single white water bird made ripples on the lake's surface as it glided and soared away.

How long had it been since she sat down?

Solus's ascent had progressed quite a bit when she finally noticed. It was about time to return to the cabin and prepare for lunch. In his current state, Kirito barely ate anything each time, so even a single missed meal would lead to a decline in his maximum Life.

"It is getting late, let us make our way back."

It was when she stood up and grasped the wheelchair's grips while saying so.

Noticing light footsteps treading over grass and climbing the hill, Alice turned about.

The one who approached was a young girl dressed in a black habit. Her lovely face that still retained vestiges of childishness showed a gleaming smile while she energetically waved her right hand.

"Nee-samaa!"

The gentle breeze brought her lively voice over and Alice smiled as well while she gave a slight wave back.

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Practically skipping over the last ten mel up, the girl took several seconds to catch her breath after her feet came to a stop, and spoke once more in a bright voice.

"Good morning, Alice-neesama!"

Springing to the side, she gave a vigorous greeting to Kirito sitting on the wheelchair as well.

"Good morning to you too, Kirito!"

Her broad grin that showed no worry over his lack of response was infused with faint sorrow the moment she turned towards the two swords on Kirito's lap.

"...Good morning, Eugeo."

Reaching out with her right hand as she whispered, she softly brushed against the Blue Rose Sword's sheath with her fingertips. If someone unknown were to do that, Kirito would show a somewhat defensive response, but he now let her do as she pleased.

Having greeted her two friends, the girl straightened up and turned back to Alice again.

Alice replied while conscious of a mysterious tenderness deep in her chest.

"Good morning, Selka. How did you ever know we were here?"

It took over a month for her to stop calling her Selka-san.

She had earnestly longed to meet her little sister ever since she found out about her existence from Kirito's words at the Central Cathedral half a year ago. However, now that that wish was granted, the more precious she found Selka, the stronger this question grew within her: if she—an ex-integrity knight by the name of Alice Synthesis Thirty, rather than Alice Schuberg—had the right to be her elder sister.

Selka might, or might not have noticed Alice's unending conflict, but nonetheless, she spoke on with a smile free from concern over that issue.

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“I didn’t search with sacred arts or anything of that sort. You were out when I visited, so I thought you could have come here since today’s weather is so fine. I left fresh milk as well as an apple and cheese pie baked just this morning on the table, so be sure to have them for lunch.”

“Thank you, that’s of great help. I was at a loss thinking of what to make.”

“Well, Kirito might end up running away someday due to the food you make, after all, nee-sama!”

Selka laughed and Alice replied while smiling as well.

“Now you’ve said it! You know, I am capable of cooking pancakes without burning any now, at least!”

“I wonder if that’s really true, you did turn them into cinders when you tried cooking them with thermal elements at first and all.”

Alice tried to berate her with a poke to her forehead with her finger, but Selka nimbly dodged it and jumped into Alice’s bosom. She gently hugged her little sister’s back closer as she nudged her face into her breast.

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It was only at such times when she strongly wished she could flee from the intense pressure weighing on her heart.

What a relief it would be if she could forget the guilt from turning her back to the duties of an integrity knight and spending her days, quietly, deep in this remote forest. Still, Alice knew at the same time that she should never forget that. The end was approaching from beyond the mountain range at the edge, moment by moment, even while she embraced her little sister.

At the very end of the fierce battle at the Axiom Church Central Cathedral—

Having suffered enough injuries to drain her Life away, Alice lay on the marble floor, immobile, vaguely aware of the flow of the battle.

The struggle to death between Administrator the highest minister and Kirito who wielded two swords.

The highest minister's annihilation, incinerated in the flames of Chief Elder Chudelkin's captivated delusions.

The death of Kirito's best friend, Eugeo, whose flesh was split apart alongside his cherished sword.

Kirito who was caring for Eugeo had vehemently cried out to a mysterious crystal plate that appeared on the north edge of the hall. At the end of the exchange that Alice hardly understood, Kirito's entire body suddenly stiffened up and just as she thought so, he fell onto the floor—with that, the world sank into silence.

Right as Alice recovered a mere, slight amount of her Life and became capable of moving, Solus's dawn shone in from the east window. With that light as a source of sacred energy, Alice first healed the fallen Kirito's wounds. However, his consciousness remained lost and she reluctantly laid him down, and then attended to herself with healing arts before inspecting the crystal plate he spoke to.

However, the surface that had shone pale purple already lost almost all of its light and there was no reply no matter how many times she touch or spoke to it.

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At a loss, Alice sat down.

She did trust in Kirito's words and fought against the absolute ruler, Administrator, in order to protect the people of the Human World and her little sister living in some remote region, but she honestly doubted she could survive.

When the strange sword soldier the highest minister called «*Sword Golem*» pierced deep into her body.

When she used her own body as a shield against that onslaught of lightning bolts.

And when she threw all caution to the wind and leapt in just as Kirito's life was about to be severed by that blade swung down—

Alice braced herself for death countless times. However, the sacrifices of Cardinal the sage, Charlotte that mysterious spider, and Eugeo, along with Kirito's gallant fighting had held on to her life.

—You saved me, so take responsibility for it!

She endlessly shouted that at Kirito who lay down at the side. But the black-haired youth's eyelids remained shut. Think about the path you should take from now on and choose it yourself... it seemed to Alice as though he was saying that.

After hugging her knees for tens of minutes, Alice finally stood up.

Perhaps due to the annihilation of the master of that space, the elevating disk had ceased motion like the crystal plate, so she broke it with her sword and leapt down to the ninety-ninth floor with Kirito on her back.

Going down the long staircase from there, she went past the elders who continued chanting arts, and reached the grand staircase from where she headed straight towards her master in swordsmanship who she had left in the large bath—towards where Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli Synthesis One was.

The large quantity of hot water frozen by Eugeo's armament full control art had mostly thawed and Bercouli's sprawled body, floating in the bath, was fortunately freed from Chudelkin's petrification art.

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Upon dragging his large frame onto the aisle and slapping his cheeks while loudly crying out “oji-sama”, the giant man let out a grand sneeze before he opened his eyes.

Alice somehow had it in herself to explain the situation to her master who went and uttered without showing any tension on his face, “Oh, it’s already morning?” Predictably enough, her words turned Bercouli’s expression grave and he spoke a single line in an overpowering voice after hearing it all.

Good work there, lil’ miss.

The knight commander’s consequent actions were prompt. They gathered the integrity knights to the «Grand Cloister of Spiritual Light» on the fiftieth floor, beginning with Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio who was somehow fully healed and asleep in the middle of the rose garden despite losing to Kirito and Eugeo, and continuing with the others who were apparently similarly bound by petrification, such as Deusolbert and Eldrie, then disseminated the facts they could.

That after a battle with two swordsmen-in-training from North Centoria Sword Mastery Academy, the highest minister, Administrator, was defeated and erased.

That the highest minister was working on a horrifying plan to transform half of the people into monstrous weaponry with bones made from swords.

That the Chamber of Elders, superior to the Order, was effectively Chief Elder Chudelkin alone and he, too, had died alongside the highest minister.

All they kept hidden was the origin of the integrity knights—no, their «conception». Bercouli withstood the impact of the truth, bearing doubts over the words the highest minister used about them summoned from the Celestial World from the start, but decided it should only be communicated to the other knight in progressive steps.

Nonetheless, Eldrie, Fanatio, and the others were visibly shaken. That was only natural. The highest minister with power comparable to the gods, the absolute ruler

who reigned for hundreds of years, had died; it should be no easy task to accept that reality.

At the end of that discussion filled with utmost disorder, the knights chose to follow their commander's orders for the time being, thanks to Bercouli's popularity and ability, as well as perhaps the unbroken operation of the «piety module». Regardless of any changes, they were still knights serving the Axiom Church and now that Administrator and Chudelkin had left the Human World, it was undeniable that Knight Commander Bercouli was at the top of the church's chain of command.

And the instant he was entrusted with that right to command, Bercouli focused all of their effort on carrying out their original duty, to «protect the Human World». He must have felt lost and conflicted himself. He did find out that there were memories of those whom he loved, stolen from him, within arm's reach, after all.

Still, he decided to securely seal the thirty swords that formed the *sword golem* and all of the over three hundred crystal prisms on the hundredth floor of the cathedral, and to temporarily hide the death of the highest minister from all but the Order. In order to prioritize the impending, extensive invasion from the Dark Territory over the recovery of the integrity knights' memories, including his own.

Bercouli somehow rallied the partially destroyed Order of the Integrity Knights, and then set out on the major task of reorganizing and retraining the Four Empires Imperial Guards of the Human World who were previously no more than an army in name; naturally, Alice assisted as well. With the impromptu eyepatch made by Kirito wrapped around her right eye, she flew about to the north and south of Centoria.

However, her time at the cathedral was limited. The traitor who turned a sword towards the Axiom Church—the unconscious Kirito, in other words—should be executed; that view was expressed by quite a number of integrity knights and even some of the ascetics who were unaware of the highest minister's death.

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One dawn, when the work necessary had settled down enough for them to catch a breather, Alice left with Kirito astride a flying dragon. It was two weeks after those intense, bloody battles.

But predicaments followed them even then. Kirito's eyes remained shut throughout even the nights camping out that she was unaccustomed to and she felt that he needed a proper roof with a warm bed, but lacked the funds to even stay in the city's inn, yet outright refused to exert her authority as an integrity knight for such.

What came to mind then was Rulid, the name of the village Kirito told her of on the outer wall of the cathedral.

Holding on the ray of hope that its inhabitants might welcome them despite her lost memories since Eugeo and she were born there, Alice turned the flying dragon's reins towards north. She flew while tending to Kirito's body, so the trip from the Norlangarth Empire to the small village at the very foot of the mountain range at the edge required three whole days.

She descended into the forest a short distance from the village in order to avoid startling the villagers and ordered the flying dragon to guard their belongings there, before heading towards the village on foot with Kirito on her back.

Upon reaching a path after passing through the forest and a wheat field, she chanced upon several villagers. However, they all looked upon them with surprise and suspicion, with not a single one calling out to them.

It was when they arrived at Rulid Village, built on high ground, and tried to pass through its wooden gate that a youth of large build leapt out from the guardhouse constructed at its side. Blood rushed to his face that still showed vestiges of freckles and he blocked Alice's path, going—

—Hold it, outsiders may not enter the village without permission!

The young guard who shouted so with his hand on the sword on his waist as though flaunting it, before doubt sank into his expression upon spotting Kirito's face while

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he was carried on Alice's back. He muttered, "Huh, isn't this guy," before staring at Alice again, his eyes and mouth gradually widening.

—You... could you be.

Alice felt slight relief at those words. She talked to the guard who seemed to remember her despite the eight years that passed, paying caution to the words she used.

—I am Alice. Please call for the village chief, Gasupht Schuberg.

It might have been best to name herself as Alice Schuberg, but she could not find it in herself to do so. Fortunately, it appeared that name was sufficient as the guard's face instantly turned blue from red while his mouth opened and closed repeatedly before rushing into the village. He did not mention anything about waiting, so Alice passed through the gate and walked on in the guard's trail.

The village soon turned riotous, like a disturbed beehive, in that early afternoon. Tens of villagers filled up the sides of the not-so-wide road, shouting out in shock upon spotting Alice as she passed by.

Almost no face expressed gladness at her homecoming, however. Rather, they could be said to seem even doubtful, wary, and afraid at Alice, clad in unfeminine metal armor, and Kirito, still asleep on her back.

The gently sloping road eventually merged into a round plaza.

A fountain and well lay in its middle with a small church, a ringed cross on its roof, in the north. When Alice came to a stop at the entrance to the plaza and the villagers began exchanging whispers with uneasy looks from a distance.

Minutes later, a single man approached with firm steps, breaking through the crowd on the east side. Alice immediately recognized the man in the prime of his life with a neat, grayed moustache as Gasupht Schuberg, the chief of Rulid Village and once a father to Alice.

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Gasupht halted a distance away, then gazed at Alice and Kirito in turn without any change in expression at all.

Roughly ten seconds passed before he let out a deep yet resonant voice.

—Are you Alice?

Alice answered the question with no more than a "yes". Yet the village chief neither walked closer nor reached out with his hands, questioning further in a voice more stern than before.

—Why are you here? Has your crime been pardoned?

She had no immediate reply this time. She herself knew neither what crime she committed nor whether it was pardoned.

Kirito mentioned the explicit reason why Integrity Knight Deusolbert took the young Alice Schuberg to the capital was «Trespassing into the Dark Territory». That was certainly a transgression of the Taboo Index. However, as an integrity knight, Alice was no longer bound by taboos. The highest minister's orders were the one and only law to a knight. But that highest minister was no more. She had no choice but to determine what were crimes and how to be pardoned from them, what was evil and what was good on her own…

Alice stared straight back into the village chief's eyes as she replied with those thoughts in her mind.

—I have lost all of the memories from when I lived in this village as punishment for my crime. I do not know if I was pardoned through that. However, I can now go nowhere but this village.

Those were Alice's unfeigned, true feelings.

Gasupht's eyelids shut as deep wrinkles formed themselves at his mouth and brow. However, the village chief raised his face before long and what he announced with a keen light in his eyes were grim words indeed.

—Leave. This village has no place for one who committed a taboo.

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Selka's face rose, perhaps sensing that instant Alice's body stiffened up, and inclined her neck slightly.

"Nee-sama...?"

Alice showed a smile as she responded to her little sister's anxious whisper.

"It's nothing, really. Now, it is about time we return."

"...Okay."

After nodding and freeing herself from the embrace, Selka spent a moment looking up towards Alice, but her bright smile returned straight away.

"I'll push until we get to the fork!"

She proclaimed and immediately stood behind the wheelchair Kirito sat upon and grasped its handles with her small hands. The wheelchair itself was rather heavy, not to mention how a single person, though skinny, along with one and a half swords at the rank of sacred tools weighed it down. That load was too much for one who was merely fourteen years old and served as a sister apprentice that did not involve physical labor—or so Alice thought the first time Selka tried—but she leaned forward with her legs standing firm, the wheelchair began moving, though slowly.

"Be careful, we are going downhill."

Selka had never let the wheelchair fall yet, but she still could not help but to call out in a slightly nervous tone which made Selka reply with a, "It's fine, you're such a worrywart, nee-sama". It seemed that when Alice was still living in Rulid, she showed a little too much concern for her little sister despite going through all those adventures and experiments with Eugeo.

Was her basic personality preserved even with her memories lost, or was it a simple coincidence? She pondered while walking beside Selka who pushed the wheelchair on with a serious expression.

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Upon reaching the foot of the hill, the gentle slope turned into a flat path. Selka earnestly continued despite the wheelchair's increase in weight. While staring at her little sister's profile, Alice's thoughts switched back to the past once more.

It was Selka who called, from under a grove of trees' shade, for Alice to stop after she left Rulid Village, dejected and crestfallen, on that day she was denied from returning to the village. If it was not for Selka's courage, acting how she did despite aware that her actions disagreed with the thoughts of her father, the village chief, and the good will of the elderly Garitta she introduced Alice to, Alice would have been still wandering about without a destination even now.

It could not have been an easy story to swallow for Selka either.

Her elder sister who finally returned to her hometown had lost all of her past memories.

Kirito who left a deep impression on her through their conversations in mere days two years ago had fallen into a coma.

And Eugeo who was like a brother to her had died—

However, Selka showed her tears only when she found out Eugeo would never return, with her smile not fading even once in front of Alice after that. She could not help but feel gratitude and wonder at the depth of her mental toughness and thoughtfulness anew with each passing day. She felt that strength was more precious and mighty than an ascetic's sacred arts, or even a knight's sword.

And at the same time, she was reminded daily of how powerless she was, without the Axiom Church.

Having built the small yet firm cabin just two kilolu away from the village, deep in the forest, with the help of the elderly Garitta, what Alice set out doing straight away was an extensive healing art on the still-unconscious Kirito.

Within the vast forest where Terraria's grace was most bountiful, she chose a day without even a single cloud in the skies to obstruct Solus's light and coalesced ten luminous elements with the plentiful sacred energy granted by the earth and sun

gods to that space, converting them into healing energy and pouring it into Kirito's body.

The healing art Alice devoted all of herself to apply had the potential to fully heal even the massive amount of Life a flying dragon had, let alone that of a human. She was confident that regardless of how grim Kirito's injuries were, he would immediately recover along with his severed right arm and open his eyes as though nothing had happened.

Yet—

Right after the blinding spiritual light left, Kirito's eyes did open but those jet-black eyes lacked any light of reason. Though Alice repeatedly called his name, shook his shoulders, and even shouted at him while embracing him, he merely looked up at the sky blankly. Alice failed to even revive his right arm.

Four months have passed since that day, but there was no sign of Kirito's mind returning.

Selka kept supporting her by insisting that Kirito would definitely recover to his old self some day since she's putting her all in nursing him. Still, Alice secretly feared it was impossible for herself.

After all, she was no more than an existence created by the highest minister, Administrator.

Selka who had been silently pushing the wheelchair so far came to a stop while saying, "Let's take… a break", waking up Alice from her musing once again.

Her left hand gently touched her little sister's back while she panted with sweat glistening on her brow.

"Thank you, Selka, I will push from here on."

"I wanted to push, all the way, until the fork…"

"You already pushed a hundred mel more than the previous time, didn't you? That helped out a lot."

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She found out from the village that situations like this would be where an elder sister, older by many years, should give her little sister some spending money, but unfortunately, she did not have even a single copper coin in her pockets. Losing even a mere shear would be horrible in her current financial situation, so she carries around money only when out to shop.

To make up for that, she brushed Selka's bright brown hair. Her little sister smiled with her breathing calmed down, but Alice noticed faint gloom on her expression and tilted her head.

"What is it, Selka? Is something bothering you?"

She asked while holding the wheelchair's grips and Selka opened her mouth after brief hesitation.

"...Erm... there's another request to deal with the trees at the cleared land from uncle Barbossa for you, big sister..."

"What, is that all? There is nothing for you to worry about, thank you for delivering the message."

Alice replied with a smile, but her sister's crestfallen expression lifted with a discontented pout.

"But... those people care only for themselves. Don't you think so too, Kirito?"

She questioned Kirito, sitting on the wheelchair, but the youth looking downwards gave no response, naturally. Still, Selka's tone turned increasingly intense as though he was in agreement.

"Neither Barbossa-san nor Redack-san bother trying to let you stay in the village, so how could they still get you to help out when they're in trouble? I know I am the one delivering the message, but you don't have to accept it if you don't want to, big sister. I will be sure to bring food from home for you."

After letting a giggle escape from those words, Alice pacified her sulking little sister.

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“Though your feelings make me happy, there is really no need to be bothered over it, Selka. I like the cabin and I feel blessed enough, staying close to the village. ...I will go immediately after Kirito is done with his lunch. Where is it?”

“...The cleared land in the south, he said.”

Selka softly replied and spent a short while silently walking beside the wheelchair.

With just a little more to the fork heading towards the log cabin, she suddenly spoke in a firm tone.

“Sister, my time as a sister apprentice will end next year and I will receive some wages, even if it’s not that much. When that time comes, you can stop helping those people, okay? If it’s for you, big sister, and Kirito, I... I will always...”

Alice gently hugged Selka whose voice came to a stop there.

She felt her tawny hair on her cheeks, a sensation much the same despite the clearly different color, and whispered.

“Thank you... But I feel blessed enough simply with you close to me, Selka...”

Seeing off Selka, who waved her hand endlessly in reluctance to part, Alice returned to the log cabin with Kirito and quickly prepared lunch.

Though she had become somewhat capable of housework recently, her skill at cooking alone remained stubbornly lacking. Compared to the Fragrant Olive Sword, the kitchen knife bought from the village’s general store seemed as unreliable as a toy and twenty or thirty minutes would pass in the blink of an eye as she nervously sliced the ingredients.

Fortunately, Selka had delivered that freshly baked pie today, so she cut it into smaller portions and fed Kirito. By bringing the pie to his mouth with a fork and waiting patiently, his lips would eventually open slightly, accepting it into his mouth. With that, Kirito would slowly, slowly chew as though replaying his memories of how he used to eat.

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While Kirito's mouth moved, she would eat the pie filled with apples and cheese herself, savoring its taste. It was likely Sadina Schuberg, the village chief's wife, who made it. Mother to Selka, and Alice.

When she still lived at the Central Cathedral, she could freely dine on the rare delicacies from around the Human World squeezed on the table in the large dining hall. Sadina's homemade pie both looked and tasted humble in comparison, but it seemed several times more delicious. Alice did feel a little peeved that it seemed to get more reaction out of Kirito than her own cooking, however.

Upon finishing the meal and the cleaning up, she sat Kirito on the wheelchair once again and placed the two swords on his lap.

The front garden shone golden in the afternoon sunlight as they left the cabin. The days were growing shorter lately and it would swiftly turn to dusk should her mind wander. Reaching the southern fork with a quick pace, she pointed her feet towards the west this time round.

The forest came to a stop shortly after she walked straight, with the wheat fields ready to be harvested stretching out. The densely packed village of Rulid could be seen beyond the heads of grain, swaying excessively under their weight. The spire shooting noticeably high up in the middle of the red bricked roofs, erected in rows, was that of the church where Selka lived.

Neither Selka nor Azariya, the sister entrusted with the church, knew the Central Cathedral managing the Axiom Church organization in the Human World's four empires was now no more than a fanciful illusion with no master. Still, the small church that served also as an orphanage stayed in operation without issue.

Even with the cathedral descending into chaos with the death of the highest minister, there was no apparent impact on the lives of the masses. The Taboo Index functioned as always, still constraining the masses' awareness. Could they truly take up arms and fight to protect the Human World?

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They would likely obey if ordered by the Axiom Church or the emperors. However, that alone could not bring them victory against the forces of darkness. Knight Commander Bercouli must be aware of that grave reality at the very least.

What would decide the course of battle in the end was neither the priority level of weapons nor the usage authority of arts, but the strength of one's will. Kirito's struggles as he upset that hopeless difference in battle potential, defeating numerous integrity knights, Chief Elder Chudelkin, and even Highest Minister Administrator, served as proof for that.

Taking on the looks given by the villagers laboring in the wheat fields, entwined with vigilance and anxiety, with her chest puffed out, Alice whispered to her master in swordsmanship in her heart.

—Oji-sama, for the masses living in the Human World, peace might not be something to protect but something granted for all of eternity.

—And the ones who nurtured that idea must be... the Axiom Church, the Taboo Index, and us, the Order of the Integrity Knights.

Even at this very moment, Knight Commander Bercouli should be toiling away, training the forces of the four empires in Central Capital Centoria and producing their equipment. Or perhaps he was already mobilizing troops to the «Great East Gate» the frontier of the Eastabarieth Empire where the fighting will be fiercest. He must be wanting for even an additional knight around, both as an assistant with practical experience and as military capability after war breaks out.

—That said, I am now...

Going through the wheat fields while sunken in her contemplation, she exited at the cleared land spreading out towards the south of the village. Stopping the wheelchair right before the dug black soil, she scanned through the vast plot of land.

It was said that a massive forest larger than the one in the east, where Alice and Kirito lived in, stood here until a mere two years ago.

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However, thanks to Kirito and Eugeo felling the Gigas Cedar, the «demonic tree» towering above all else as it ruled over the forest and endlessly absorbed sacred power, the village's men could now engross themselves in expanding the fields, or so Selka had said with an exasperated look.

A gigantic pitch-black stump remained right in the middle of the cleared land and to its south, vigorous chopping noises rang out from the axes of tens of villagers. The potbellied man standing in a corner, issuing booming instructions all about without an axe in his hands, was the master of the largest farm in the village, Nygr Barbossa.

Though somewhat reluctant, Alice still pushed the wheelchair over the narrow, beaten path. Kirito made absolutely no reaction even as he passed along the stump, the vestiges of the enormous tree he once fell; his head remained hung down as he held the two swords.

The first to notice the approaching pair were young men from the Barbossa family, resting atop the trunk of a freshly fallen tree. The trio, seemingly fifteen or sixteen years old, watched Alice, who had a scarf wrapped over her blonde hair, without reserve before shifting their gaze towards Kirito in his wheelchair. Deep jeering could be heard as they exchanged words in an undertone.

Upon ignoring them and passing through them, one of the youths shouted out in a drawl.

"Uncleee, she's hereee."

Nygr Barbossa, who was screaming everywhere with his hands on his waist, vigorously spun around at that and showed a smirk on his greasy, round face. His large mouth and narrow eyes reminded her of Chief Elder Chudelkin somewhat.

Still, Alice returned the best smile she could muster and gave a slight nod.

"Good afternoon, Barbossa-san. I heard you had work for me, so..."

"Oooh, ooh, if it isn't Alice, I'm glad you're here."

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His two hands spread out, approaching haltingly, as his round tummy quivered; Alice was convinced he desired an embrace, but after a look at the wheelchair before her, he fortunately gave up on that.

In exchange, Nygr stood a mere fifty cen on her right before spinning his huge frame and pointing at a towering, large tree between the forest and cleared land.

"Look, you can see it, can't you? We've spent all our time on that frustrating platinum oak since yesterday morning, but this pathetic amount is how much progress was made even with ten adult men swinging their axes at it."

The index finger and thumb on his right hand formed a smallish semicircle.

The large white and brown tree with a trunk of a mel and a half across had spread its roots deep into the earth, stubbornly rejecting the laborers. Two men swung their large axes in turn even now, but the notch carved in its trunk was shallow indeed, at less than even ten cen.

Sweat poured down the men's bare upper bodies like waterfalls. Their chests and arm muscles were developed well enough, but their handling were rather stiff, perhaps due to the lack of need to wield an axe in their daily activities.

One of the men had his right leg slip as she watched and struck a wrong spot at an angle. The axe snapped at the middle of its handle and unrestrained laughter from the man's co-workers immersed him as he fell hard on his buttocks.

"Good grief, what are those blockheads doing…"

Nygr moaned and looked at Alice once again.

"At that rate, I have no idea how many more days will it take for that one tree. And while we were stuck here with that, Redack's men have already expanded the land by twenty mel in every direction!"

After uttering the name of the next most influential farming household after the Barbossas, Nygr kicked away a pebble at his feet. His breathing had grown

distraught, but all of a sudden, a full smile appeared on his face as he let out a wheedling voice.

"And that's how it is, I know our agreement was for once a month, but could you treat it as an exception just this once and lend me your strength, Alice? You probably don't remember, but I spared… no, treated you to sweets time after time when you were young. You were such a cute little miss back then, you see, no, no, of course, that's not to say that's any different now…"

Alice interrupted Nygr's words while holding back her sigh.

"I understand, Barbossa-san. I will treat this one particular time as an exception."

Getting rid of trees and rocks, like the platinum oak before her eye, obstructing the land clearing was Alice's current sacred task—no, her temporary source of income.

Naturally, it was not work officially assigned to her. There was an incident about a month into her peaceful life on the outskirts of the village where a gigantic fallen rock sealed the road towards the cleared land to the west. The episode of Alice rolling that rock away on her own as she came across it spread through the village as a rumor and before she knew it, they depended on her for assistance on tasks like this.

It was a fact that money was necessary if she were to continue living with Kirito, so she was thankful for the offers. Still, as Selka was worried that the men would bother her with an endless stream of requests if she took on the physical labor without complaint, she decided to limit her help to once a month for each farming household.

Nygr should be bound by every single rule laid in the Taboo Index, the fundamental laws of the Norlangarth Empire, and those of the village, but it came as no surprise to her that he would send two requests within the month despite that being a violation of the agreement. Though he had not broken through the «seal of the right eye»—what was «Code 871» according to the highest minister's words—like Alice or Eugeo, it was likely he simply felt Alice to be beneath himself. He must felt no need

to naively abide by some agreement made with an ex-convict living in some hut on the outskirts of the village.

Even with those thoughts in her mind, Alice nodded at Nygr once again before parting from the wheelchair. She took note of Kirito's status, but he seemed unconcerned by the clamor in the surroundings. After telling him that she would be right back in her heart, she walked towards the large platinum oak.

The men who noticed Alice showed smirks or blatantly cluck their tongues. However, there were now few unaware of Alice's strength, so they distanced themselves from the tree without a word en masse.

Taking their place before the great tree, Alice quickly drew a seal of sacred letters with a finger on her right hand and brought out its «Stacia Window». Its quantity of Life was quite a figure, as expected of one that ten adult men would have trouble against. Using a borrowed axe as usual would prove ineffective against that priority level.

Returning to the wheelchair in a jog for the moment, she bent down and whispered softly.

"I apologize, Kirito. I would like you to lend me your sword for a little while."

She gently touched the black leather sheath with her right hand and felt his left arm tense up slightly as it held the sword.

However, after patiently looking into his blank eyes, the strength eventually left his arm and a hoarse voice escaped his throat.

"...Aah..."

This was likely a fragment of his memories rather than her feelings actually getting through to him. What controlled Kirito now were not his thoughts but the memories resident in his breast.

"Thank you."

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Whispering so, she slowly brought up the black sword from under his arm. After affirming that Kirito remained docile, she returned back to the platinum oak.

But still, this was a splendid tree. Though it could not compare to the great ancient trees rising around Central Capital Centoria, it must be over a hundred years old.

Alice gave an apology in her heart before stabilizing her footing.

Her right leg forward and her left leg back. She gently placed her right hand on the grip wound with black leather of the «Night Sky Sword» unevenly set on her left hand. She measured the distance to the tree with her left eye.

"Hey, hey, you think you can break platinum oak with that thin sword?"

One of the men shouted and the crowd went into an impromptu frenzy. That sword's gonna break; the sun'll set before that; while the jeers flew in one after another, Nygr Barbossa's concerned voice mixed in.

"Aah, Alice, if possible, I would rather you do something about it within an hour, you know?"

She had fallen over ten trees since she started this job, but required around thirty minutes almost every time. The reason behind that slowness was due to her having to keep her strength in check to avoid breaking the axes she borrowed. But she had no need for that worry today. The Night Sky Sword was a sacred tool boasting a priority level equal to Alice's Fragrant Olive Sword.

"No, I will not require that long."

Replying with a near-murmur, Alice gripped the sword's handle.

"...Haah!!"

A short yell. A cloud of dust whirled up from beneath her right foot, dug firmly onto the ground, like some sort of explosion.

It had been a while since she swung an actual sword, but fortunately, she had yet to forget her techniques. The horizontal slash from the left in the same motion as drawing it from its sheath ran through the air like black lightning.

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The surrounding men appeared to have been unable to follow the slash itself. Even as Alice rose up from her final posture, with the sword swung completely to the right in front of her, they continued scowling questioningly.

There was no more than the meager notch made by the men on the platinum oak's smooth bark; it had suffered no other damage—or so it appeared.

A "Whaat, she missed?" eventually came from somebody and a number of them laughed. Alice glanced at the person to whom that voice belonged to and spoke as she sheathed the sword.

"It will be falling that way."

"Hah? The heck are you…"

The man's two eyes opened wide with shock upon getting to that point in his words. He saw the platinum oak's trunk slowly begin to tilt. A scream grew from him and those around him as they ran behind.

The huge tree fell with a terrific tremor where the men were until three seconds ago.

Alice moved to the front of the stump as she warded off the rising thick cloud of dust with her right hand. Fine tree rings were clearly visible on the newly-made cross-section and shone as though it was polished, but a single section on the edge was slightly frayed.

Perhaps her skills have dulled, or perhaps her unavailable right eye was to blame—Alice pondered as she turned herself about.

Her upper body unconsciously straightened up in the next instant. Nygr Barbossa had a full smile on his face and was rushing towards her with heavy steps, his arms spread out.

She instinctively lifted the sword in her left hand and Nygr came to an abrupt stop at the clink made by the guard. Still, his smile remained and he put his spread out hands together in front of his body as he shouted.

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“B-Bri… brilliant! What skill! Jink, the guard chief, couldn’t even hope to match that! It’s practically divine!”

He went another mel closer and continued his words with an expression filled equally with admiration and greed.

“H-H-How about it, Alice, I will double your fee, so let’s not make it once a month, help us out once a week… no, once a day!!”

Alice lightly shook her head at Nygr who was rubbing his hands together fast.

“No, the fee I am currently receiving is plenty.”

If she were to wield the Fragrant Olive Sword and make use of the armament full control art, it would not be on the scale of one large tree a day; it would be possible to change this forest to nothing more than barren land as far the eye could see in mere minutes. But if she were to do that, their requests would stretch on to tilting the plains, smashing rocks, and even making it rain.

Nuhnhnhnhnh; Nygr moaned in agony before finally snapping out of it, blinking, after a “my pay, please” from Alice.

“O-Oh, that’s right, that’s right.”

Sticking his hand in his pocket, he pinched out the agreed hundred Shear, a single silver coin, from a leather bag that sounded heavy.

Dropping that onto Alice’s palm, Nygr still stubbornly added some words.

“How about this, Alice? I will pay another silver coin, so how about you decline those under Redack this month if they ask for help…”

It was then, when she held back her sigh and was about to reject his offer once more.

A heavy clunk reached her ears. Her face sprung up and saw the wheelchair sprawled on its side with Kirito thrown onto the ground a distance away.

“…Kirito!”

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She gave a hoarse shout and rapidly slipped past Nygr.

She could sense desperation from Kirito as he reached out with his left arm with his stomach lying on the ground. Ahead of him were the previously resting young men, two who now supported the long sword sheathed in white leather on the ground as they cried out in excitement.

“Uohh, woah, this is heavy as heck!!”

“That’s why even that girl can bring down that platinum oak in one blow, huh?”

“Shut up and hold onto it properly!”

The third youth shouted and held the Blue Rose Sword’s handle with both hands so as to draw it.

Alice heard her own teeth gnashing as they grinded together. Released next from her throat was a sharp yell.

“You bastards...!!”

The youths’ mouths opened wide upon hearing that as they looked at Alice.

She ran through the remaining twenty mel in an instant and came to a stop with the dust whirling up. The three looking at Alice’s face backed off haltingly.

Somehow restraining the emotions threatening to burst out with a deep breath, Alice first helped up the fallen Kirito. While sitting him on the wheelchair once again, she ordered with a stifled voice.

“That sword belongs to this man. Return it now.”

Defiant expressions instantly showed up on the trio’s faces. The lips of the one with a large build and about to draw the Blue Rose Sword grew crooked and he pointed at Kirito.

“We did ask that guy if we could borrow the sword, you know?”

Back on the wheelchair, Kirito’s left arm was still reaching out towards the pure white sword while his feeble voice leaked out.

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One of the youths holding back the sheath warped his lips in ridicule as he continued.

"And then, he generously lent it to us. With those cries of *aah*, *aah*, you know?"

The last went with the flow and laughed with a "yep, yep".

Alice could not help but to tighten her right hand's grip on the wheelchair's handle. That hand was unmistakably seeking to draw the Night Sky Sword hanging off her left hand.

She would have sliced off those six hands touching the Blue Rose Sword without even a hint of hesitation half a year ago. Integrity knights were above the Taboo Index and its prohibition on hurting others. And in the first place, with the seal on her right eye currently broken, there were no longer any laws capable of keeping Alice's actions in check.

Still—

Alice grinded her teeth so hard it hurt as she fought against the impulse surging through herself.

These youths were part of the people of the Human World that Kirito and Eugeo sacrificed their lives to protect. She could not hurt them. Neither of them would wish for that.

Alice remained silent without moving a cen for several seconds. But she likely failed to conceal the bloodlust emanating from her left hand. The trio wiped off their smiles and averted their eyes, afraid.

"...Fine, no need for that scary look."

The larger one eventually spat out with a sulk and took his hands off the sword's grip. The remaining pair let go of the sheath with faces that appeared relieved, probably already at their limits in supporting it. The Blue Rose Sword laid down heavily where it was.

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Alice approached without any additional words, stooped over, and deliberately used just three fingers on her right hand to lift the white leather sheath. After a glare at the brats right after turning about, she returned to the wheelchair.

She wiped the soil that got on the sheath with the cuff of her overcoat, then placed on Kirito's lap both the white and black swords which he firmly hugged before coming to a stop.

She gave Nygr Barbossa a glance, seeing him apparently paying that commotion no attention and engrossed in directing the men. Alice lightly bowed towards his back as he continued his shouting, and then pushed the wheelchair back north on the narrow path.

The anger raging in her breast for the first time in a while had turned to a cold sense of futility.

It was not her first time thinking so since she began living in the forest near Rulid. Most of the villagers avoided even talking to Alice and as for Kirito who lost his sense of self, they would not even treat him as a human.

She had no plans to condemn them. Alice was likely still a criminal who violated the Taboo Index to them, after all. She felt thankful enough for them giving their silent consent for her to stay close to the village, and selling her food and daily necessities.

Still, she still pondered in a corner of her mind. —What for?

Exactly what did she suffer so much and fight against the highest minister, Administrator, for? The other highest minister, Cardinal, the intelligent black spider, Charlotte, and Eugeo lost their lives; Kirito lost his speech and emotions; exactly what was protected after all that?

That line of thought ended up on a question that she could never utter.

Was there truly a need to protect people like those from the Barbossas?

That doubt was partly what made Alice abandon her sword and live in this remote land.

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The tremendous military forces of darkness were drawing closer, moment by moment, beyond the «Great East Gate» at the end of the Eastabarieth Empire even now. It was dubious if the reborn «Human World Defense Army» fostered by Knight Commander Bercouli could even be deployed in time. As Alice was not relieved of her integrity knight duties—the only one capable of doing so was the deceased highest minister—perhaps she ought to be rushing towards the Great Gate to join them as soon as she could.

However, the weight of the Fragrant Olive Sword was now beyond what Alice could handle.

The Celestial World she believed to be her origin was actually a deception. The Axiom Church she swore her fealty to was smeared in lies. Not to mention she now knew the ugliness and vulgarity of the Human World's inhabitants far too vividly. The time she could swing her sword without doubts over her own justice and pray to the gods was of the distant past.

Those Alice now truly wished to protect numbered a mere few. Her father; her mother; Selka; the elderly Garitta; and Kirito. If nothing would befall them, what issue would there be turning her back to her knight duties and continuing her peaceful life in this land—?

Leaving the cleared land, Alice's feet stopped just as they reached the path beyond the wheat fields, and she whispered to Kirito.

"Could we go shopping in the village seeing as we are here? I will not allow some insolent child to harass you this time."

There was no reply, but judging the lack of response as consent, Alice pushed the wheelchair on towards the north.

The skies were dyed in the shades of sunset by the time they bought a week's worth of food and essentials with the hundred Shear silver coin earned and returned to the forest cabin.

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She was on the way up the cabin's porch when she noticed a low whoosh approaching. Descending slightly with the wheelchair, she awaited the origin of that sound near the meadow's middle.

What made its appearance before long, skimming the treetops, was a gigantic silver beast with two wings, a long neck, and a tail—a flying dragon. Alice's flying dragon who brought the two of here from the central capital. With the name, Amayori.

The flying dragon circled through the skies above the meadow twice before gently descending. Tucking in her wings and stretching out her neck, she first touched Kirito's chest with the tip of her nose before rubbing her large head against Alice.

Upon scratching the faintly bluish fuzz under the dragon's neck, a low *kururu* rang out from her throat.

"Amayori, you have gotten a little plump. You have been eating too many of the lake's fishes."

After being scolded with a vague smile, she breathed out from its nose as though embarrassed, turned her long body about, and walked towards her bed east of the cabin. She curled up atop her bed made from thickly laid dry grass, entwining her tail with her head.

Half a year back, Alice undid the leather bridle fixed on Amayori's head and released the binding art on the day she decided to build this cabin in this meadow. And she even went to the extent of telling her that she was now free and to return to the flying dragon nest in the west empire, but the flying dragon made no attempt to leave Alice.

Making a bed with grass she gathered on its own, she plays in the forest and catches fish in the lake during daytime, but comes back in the evening without exception. Despite the lack of the sacred art that restrains the proud, brutal disposition of a dragon and brought her under a knight's command, it was a mystery why she did not return whence she came.

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That said, she was simply glad that Amayori, always together with her since she became an integrity knight, would remain by her side through her free will, so she made no actual effort to chase her away. The villagers spotting her flying over the forest at times seemed to be one of the causes for Alice's unsavory reputation among them, but she felt no point in being bothered over that now.

After telling Amayori good night as she began her low snoring atop the dry grass, Alice pushed the wheelchair into the cabin.

For dinner, she made a stew from half-moon beans and meatballs. The beans were just a little hard and the balls were not all that consistent, but it seemed to have tasted rather decent. Naturally, it was not like Kirito gave any opinion through his words. He merely chewed and swallowed, as though from memory, whenever the small spoon entered his mouth.

She considered how it would be nice if she knew his likes and dislikes at least, but realized she actually held a proper conversation with this youth for less than even a full day after thinking about it. It seemed Selka lived with him in the church for a while two years ago, but she only remembered him indiscriminately enjoying everything served. She thought that, too, was just like him.

It happened after she moved Kirito, who managed to finish the stew after some time, to the small stove's side along with the chair and was washing the cutlery in the sink, lining them up in the drainer.

Amayori who usually slept until dawn suddenly cried out with a low *rururuu* outside the window.

Her hands jerked to a stop and she perked up her ears. A noise unsuited to the season was mixed in the night wind passing through the forest, like a cold winter wind. A noise like thin, large wings flying against the wind.

"……!"

Leaping out of the kitchen, she confirmed Kirito was staying quiet on the chair before opening the entrance. Straining her ears again, she judged the wind noise to

be approaching, immediately went down to the front yard, and looked upwards into the night sky.

The black silhouette descending in a spiral against the backdrop of a sky filled with stars unmistakably belonged to a flying dragon. She looked towards the east of the meadow just to be sure, but naturally, Amayori was crouching on her bed as she looked up at the sky.

"Could that..."

The moment she was about to return for her sword, having thought it could be a darkness knight from the Dark Territory who crossed the mountain range at the edge, she saw the dragon's scales gleam silver in the moonlight. She lessened the tension in her shoulders slightly. The integrity knights of the Axiom Church were the only ones to ride flying dragons with silver scales even if one were to search the world over.

That said, it was still too early to be relieved. Exactly who would fly to a region this remote, and for what reason? Could it be that the debate regarding the execution of the traitor, Kirito, continued even throughout this half year and that the cathedral had finally dispatched someone to do the deed?

Perhaps sensing Alice's tension, Amayori crept out from her bed before lifting her head up high and crying out once more. However, her menacing, deep tone soon faded away, replaced by a coy, high-pitched *kyuun*.

Alice, too, knew why straight away.

The flying dragon that landed on the southern part of the meadow after circling another three times had fuzz in a shade much like Amayori's growing around its neck. That could only be Amayori's elder brother, a dragon named Takiguri. In other words, the one riding on him was—

Alice called out in a stiff tone towards the knight clad in full silver armor who landed on the ground in an elegant motion.

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"...To think you would find out about this place. What business do you have here, Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one?"

The one and only integrity knight possessing a number younger than Alice, who was *thirty*, did not speak immediately and instead, first gave a deep bow with his right hand on his chest.

Straightening his body, he slowly removed his helmet. His lustrous light purple hair fluttered in the night wind and his good looks with a sense of urban flamboyance were revealed. With his high, smooth voice, rare for a man—

"It has been a while, my master, Alice-sama. Your beauty has not faded despite this change in dressing. I could not help but to make haste to meet with you, master, with a bottle of alcohol from my cherished collection upon imagining the bewitching splendor your golden locks would have under this evening's glorious moon."

The left hand held behind his back darted forward and in it was a bottle of wine.

Alice held back a sigh as she answered the man who apparently regarded her as his master.

"...I am truly glad your wounds have healed, but I see your personality is as it had always been. I have only just noticed, but your manner of speech is slightly similar to Chief Elder Chudelkin's."

Turning her back to Eldrie who let out a mild *ugh*, she proceeded towards the cabin.

"E-Erm, Alice-sama..."

"I will hear you out inside if it is important. If it is not, down the wine on your own and return to the central capital."

Alice gave a glance at the siblings reunited after half a year, Takiguri and Amayori, who were happily nuzzling each other's heads, then returned to the cabin fast.

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Eldrie, who docilely followed along, scanned through the narrow cabin with curious eyes before his gaze fixated on Kirito looking downwards beside the stove. However, he mentioned nothing about the rebel with whom he had once crossed swords with and swiftly slipped to the table and pulled a chair for Alice.

"……"

It seemed ludicrous to thank him, so she sighed instead and sat straight down. Eldrie sat opposite Alice without asking and placed the wine bottle on the table. His face clouded over the moment their gazes met straight on, likely spotting the black bandage still covering Alice's right eye. That expression soon vanished, however, with Eldrie's nose twitching as he raised his face.

"…There seems to be some aroma here, Alice-sama. On another note, I have yet to take dinner due to this trip I undertook in haste."

"On another note? In the first place, what would spur you to bring wine instead of rations when flying to this remote region from the central capital?"

"I swore to the three goddesses that I will never have that dried, squirmy thing in this life. If I have to satisfy my stomach with that, I would rather starve and give my Life up…"

Alice stood from the chair without listening to Eldrie's absurd excuses to the end. Moving to the kitchen, she served the leftover stew from the metal pot on the stove into a wooden plate and returned to the table.

Eldrie stared at the bowl placed before his eyes with a mixture of delight and suspicion.

"……Excuse my abrupt question, but could this possibly made by your hand, Alice-sama…?"

"Why, yes, it is. What about it?"

"……No. I am merely overjoyed by this day, in which I could partake in cooking made by my master; more so than being endowed with some hidden sword stance."

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Holding the spoon with a nervous expression, he brought beans to his mouth.

Alice asked once again towards Eldrie whose mouth moved as he chewed.

“And so, how did you find this place? No art could reach this far from the central capital… and I hardly believe the Order could dispatch flying dragons to every area in search of me alone in its current situation.”

Eldrie gave no reply for a moment, murmuring comments such as “so it’s not that bad, after all” as he energetically moved the spoon, but eventually raised his face from the now-emptied plate, then wiped his mouth with a handkerchief he took out from one place or another before looking straight towards Alice.

“I came, following the bonds of fate linking us, Alice-sama… or so I would like to say, but unfortunately, this was an utter coincidence.”

His right hand flashed open in a pompous gesture.

“Reports that the goblins and orcs were sneaking about of late came from the knights going about the mountain range at the edge. The caves in the north, south, and west were all destroyed under the knight commander’s command, but as there was still the possibility of them stubbornly digging through, I came to confirm the issue.”

“…The caves…?”

Alice’s knitted her eyebrows.

Among the four passages passing through the mountain range at the edge, the caves in the south, the west, and the one exceeding close to Rulid Village, the north, were rather narrow, denying access to the orcs and giants who formed the bulk of the darkness forces. As such, she anticipated the enemy army would gather at the «Great east Gate», but Knight Commander Bercouli had collapsed those three caves immediately upon assuming command as insurance.

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That was precisely why Alice built this secret home on this land, but the situation would change if the enemy were to dig through the cave. Rulid Village would flip from a peaceful remote region to the front lines where battle would first break out.

“And so… did you confirm the movements of the darkness forces?”

“Though I flew around the cave for an entire day, I saw not even a single goblin, let alone an orc.”

Eldrie lightly shrugged and continued.

“Perhaps they mistook a pack of beasts for military forces.”

“…Did you check inside the cave?”

“Naturally. I peeked in from the Dark Territory’s side, but it was buried in rocks up to the ceiling. They would probably need a large force to dig through that. …Then Takiguri strangely kicked up a fuss when I pulled on the reins to return to the central capital. I left the flying to him and he descended straight towards here. Honestly, I am just as shocked. It’s a huge coincidence… no, maybe it was the guiding hand of fate after all.”

Having left his flowery language behind some time ago, Eldrie showed the resolute face of a knight and continued.

“I am obligated to report that I had come across this opportunity for an audience with you on this particular occasion. Alice-sama… please return to the Order! Rather than the assistance of a thousand men, what we need now is your sword!!”

Alice slowly turned down her eye as though avoiding the knight’s forceful gaze.

She knew.

She knew the crackling of the brittle wall shielding the Human World crumbling away. And of the hardships Knight Commander Bercouli and the newly-formed Defense Army suffer as they propped it up.

Alice could never repay her debt to the knight commander for his protection and guidance, and she had yet to lose her sense of unity with those in the Order of the

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Integrity Knights, including Eldrie. That said, that was insufficient to spur her to battle.

Strength is the might of one's will. Alice realized that truth through the battle at the cathedral. If willpower could allow one to overturn a devastating difference in battle potential, like Kirito back then, then it could dull the strongest sacred tool too—

"...I cannot."

Alice softly replied.

Eldrie's sharp voice rang out at once.

"Why."

Without waiting for a reply, his sight, keen like a whip, turned to the young man sitting on the chair next to the stove.

"Is it for that man? Is your heart still led astray, Alice-sama, by that man who broke out of the cathedral's jail and turned his treacherous blade on many knights, the chief elder, and even the Esteemed Highest Minister? If that is so, I shall cut off the source of your hesitation for you this very moment."

Alice's one eye glared at Eldrie as he put strength into his right hand holding onto the table's end.

"Stop it!"

Though that single line was at a suppressed volume, the knight still straightened up his upper body with a start upon hearing it.

"He, too, only fought for the justice he believes in. Otherwise, how could he defeat all of us integrity knights, who are supposed to be the strongest, and even the knight deputy commander? You should know the weight behind his sword as well, having crossed swords firsthand."

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Even as wrinkles came together near his high nose bridge, Eldrie slowly released the strength in his shoulders. He lowered his gaze to the table while murmuring to himself.

"...Certainly, I, too, find it hard to accept Administrator-sama's plan of changing half of the people into soulless soldiers with bones of swords. And without that youth... Kirito and his friend, Eugeo, it is unlikely anyone would stop that plan from being realized. Not to mention that if it is as Bercouli-dono said, that the one who guided that pair truly stood on a par with Administrator-sama once, as another highest minister, Cardinal-sama, I would hardly wish to point out Kirito's crimes. However... if that is so, I find it even harder to swallow!!"

As though pouring out what he had always kept suppressed in his breast, Eldrie shouted.

"If the skills of the rebel, Kirito, overwhelm even those of us integrity knights as you have mentioned, Alice-sama, why does he not take up his sword and fight?! Why was he reduced to such a miserable state and continues to anchor you down to this remote region?! If he murdered Administrator-sama in order to protect the masses, then should he not be rushing to the Great East Gate this very moment?!!"

Eldrie's words, as though spewing out fire, showed no sign of reaching Kirito's heart either. His half-closed eyes reflected no more than the light from the wavering embers in the stove.

The heavy, lasting silence that descended was punctured by Alice's calm voice.

"...I am sorry, Eldrie. I am incapable of going with you, after all. It has nothing to do with Kirito's status... I have merely lost the strength to wield my sword. I doubt I could even get a point if I were to cross swords with you now."

Eldrie's two eyes flashed open as though he was taken aback. The prideful knight's face contorted like that of a young boy.

That face showed a smile bearing resignation in time.

"...I see. Then I have nothing more to say..."

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Slowly stretching out his right hand, he started muttering a sacred art. The following quick incantation created two crystal elements and changed their forms into that of extremely thin wine glasses.

Picking the wine bottle up from the table, he flicked the tough cork off with just his fingertip. He poured a little of the crimson red fluid into both glasses from the bottle before putting it down.

"...If I had known we would be bidding each other farewell with this wine, I would have brought along one that was aged for two hundred years old from the East Empire in my collection."

Eldrie lifted one of the glasses, downed it in one go, and then gently returned it to the table. He took a bow and stood up, his pure white mantle billowing.

"I bid you farewell here, master. Your guidance on my sword and arts shall remain unforgotten as long as this Eldrie lives."

"...All the best. I pray you stay safe."

Lightly nodding back towards Alice who managed to get those words through her mouth somehow, the integrity knight scraped his boots against the floor as he walked away. Alice could not help but to avert her eyes from his back filled with unshakable pride.

The door opened and closed. A single shrill cry came from Takiguri on the front yard, followed by the sound of flapping wings. Amayori's voice, nasal from her reluctance to part with her brother, pricked Alice's breast.

Though the strong flapping vanished into the distance before long, Alice continued sitting without stirring.

Right before the Life of the glasses made from crystal elements expired, she gently lifted one to her lips with her fingertips. The first wine she tasted in this half year left an aftertaste more bitter and sour than sweet on her tongue. The two empty glasses scattered into pale light as they disintegrated seconds later.

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She pushed the cork back into the bottle, yet to be emptied, and stood up. Moving to the stove, she called out towards Kirito who still sat in silence.

"...I am sorry, you must be tired. It is long past the usual bedtime, after all. Now, let us go to bed."

Gently tapping his shoulders with her hands to make him stand, she then guided him to the connecting bedroom. She changed his black robe to his undyed sleepwear before laying him on the bed at the window.

Even upon bringing up the folded blanket at her feet and covering him up to his neck with it, Kirito's eyes remained half-open, still staring at the ceiling unblinkingly.

The room was filled with a pale blue darkness after she blew out the lamp on the wall. She sat down beside Kirito and softly caressed his emaciated chest and bony shoulders for several minutes; his eyelids fell only then, as though some source of power he had was cut off.

She waited until the sleeping Kirito's breathing stabilized before leaving the bed and changing into white sleepwear herself. Returning to the living room, she checked on Amayori from the window, then extinguished the two lamps and went back to the bedroom.

She lifted the blanket on the bed and slipped in beside Kirito as his faint warmth enveloped her body.

Though closing her eye would have usually allowed her to flee into her sleep without delay, her drowsiness seemed mostly absent today.

The blinding white of the mantle whipping on Eldrie's back as he left remained imprinted on the insides of her eyelids, stinging her eyes.

That same pride should have filled her own back in those days. That unshakable resolve surging through her body as energy for protecting the Human World, its inhabitants, and the Axiom Church's authority with her sword.

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However, every last drop of that strength had left her.

She had a question for Eldrie—for her former disciple. Exactly what do you fight for, now that both the church and the highest minister have been exposed as falsehoods?

But she could not ask. None of the integrity knights were informed of the entirety of the highest minister's horrifying scheme aside from Bercouli and herself. Not even Eldrie knew the fact that his «memory fragment» and his «most beloved person», reduced to a part of the sword golem, remained on the sealed highest floor.

As such, he still believed in the concept of the Axiom Church. He still waits, expectantly, for the day the three goddesses would send a new highest minister to the cathedral to bestow their infallible guidance.

But what should she do, as one aware that the goddesses and the Celestial World were both great lies?

It was perfectly understandable, but Knight Commander Bercouli had to hide half of the truths from the knights to have them prepare for the incoming war. The hesitation currently in her breast would certainly infect the other knights if she was in their presence.

Nobody knew if the Defense Army established in haste could repel the coordinated assault from the darkness forces. If they broke through the Great East Gate, the monsters thirsting for blood would march on to this remote village sooner or later. Was there no method to avoid that disaster—a certain voice replayed within Alice's mind every time she pondered that.

The two lines that came from that mysterious crystal plate after the battle with the highest minister, before Kirito collapsed.

—Head for the *World End Altar*.

—Straight south after you exit the eastern large gate.

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She had no recollection of this name, «*World End Altar*» in the Sacred Tongue. However, she knew what could be found upon exiting the Great East Gate. The wilderness of the Dark Territory: soil blackened like cinders and skies in the shade of blood reaching out. Neither advance nor escape was easy once one took a step in.

Even if she surmounted the outrageous difficulties to reach the altar, what awaited her there? Was there truly someone—or something—capable of protecting the inhabitants of the Human World from the darkness forces...?

Alice tilted her head atop the pillow and stared at the youth stretched out on the other side of the bed.

Creeping through the blanket, she moved to Kirito's side. Reaching out her hands after slight hesitation, she clung onto him like a child spooked by a nightmare.

No matter how hard Alice drew his dismally thin body closer, the youth who made her heart waver with intensity on a par with flames showed absolutely no reaction. His pulse continued its sluggish pace; his lowered eyelashes remained utterly motionless. *He*... no, *that* might no longer be anything more than an empty shell with its soul utterly burnt out.

If her sword was now in her right hand—

She could bring an end to it all, stabbing their two touching hearts as one.

That momentary thought overflowed from Alice's eyes as tears and fell onto Kirito's nape.

"Tell me, Kirito... What should I do..."

No answer for her question came.

"What... should I....."

The moonlight pouring in from a gap in the curtains coalesced and faded within the teardrops ever-increasing.

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2

The twenty-second day of the tenth month that came next was the coldest it got throughout that autumn.

Calling off the walk, she spent it together with Kirito by the stove. She intended to make plenty of firewood as the elderly Garitta had taught her to before winter truly arrived, but it appeared there would be no need for that.

After taking the entire day to write a mere two letters on parchment, Alice hesitated for a moment before signing off with *Synthesis Thirty* in Sacred Tongue as well below the Schuberg family name in Common Tongue.

She neatly folded one, put a wrapper on it, and addressed it to Selka. She set it on the table beside the other for the elderly Garitta.

The letters expressed farewells and apologies. She could no longer stay in this house now that Integrity Knight Eldrie knew of it. The next to come would likely be Knight Commander Bercouli himself, rather than Eldrie. Alice had no words she could use against her master in swordsmanship, her benefactor.

Hence, she would leave once more.

A thin, long sigh leaked from Alice before she raised her face and looked at the black-haired youth sitting on the opposite side of the table.

“Hey, Kirito. Where do you wish to go? I heard the highlands in the west are a truly beautiful sight. Or perhaps the jungles in the south? It would be warm year-long and the fruits there seem plentiful.”

Despite the bright voice she deliberately used, Kirito showed no response as always.

His empty eyes stayed glued to the tabletop. Her heart hurt upon thinking how she had to drag this injured youth from stability again. Still, even so, she could not possibly leave him in Rulid. Alice could not force such a task on Selka who was a sister apprentice, neither did she desire to. Caring for Kirito was the one and only reason Alice found to continue living.

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"...I know, let us leave our destination to Amayori. You should go to bed soon, we will have to wake early tomorrow."

Alice changed Kirito, put him to bed, then changed into her own sleepwear, and extinguished the light before slipping under the blanket.

Her ears focused on Kirito's breathing by her side in the darkness. She gently shifted herself after he completely fell asleep.

Laying her head on Kirito's bony chest, steady beating reached her ear pressing against it.

Kirito's heart was no longer here. These heart beats, too, were no more than echoes from the past. Alice came to think so through the months she spent sleeping aside him each night. However, she still believed there was something remaining deep within each beat that echoed out.

If Kirito currently lost only his means of expressing himself yet retained his ability to think, what could she say to excuse this behavior of hers? Alice sank into the shallow abyss of sleep as a mild smile formed as she pondered.

Startling, weak shaking came from the body against hers.

She somehow managed to lift her heavy eyelids. She turned her left eye towards the window in the east, but the sky visible in the gap between the curtains was still pitch dark. Her sleep lasted two, three hours at most by her intuition.

Alice whispered to Kirito whose body stiffly trembled once again.

"It is still night... go to sleep for a little longer..."

She moved her eyelids back down and thought to rub Kirito's chest until he went back to sleep. However, Alice finally noticed the youth's abnormal behavior as his soft voice reached her ears.

"Ah... aah..."

"Kirito...?"

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Kirito, in his current state, possessed no extraneous needs. He should not awake due to the cold, his thirst, or any such thing. And yet, the youth's trembling grew stronger while his legs moved as though to leave the bed.

"Is something the matter…?"

Alice quickly brought herself up, wondering if he had, by some chance, regained his consciousness, and generated a single luminous element as even the time required to light the lamp seemed too precious.

She breathed out a disappointed sigh as she saw only that usual hollow darkness within Kirito's eyes that showed up in the faint white light. But, then, what had—

The sound that reached Alice's ears this time came from outside the window.

"Kururu, kururururuu!"

Cries came from Amayori who should have been sleeping in a corner of the vacant land. Sharp, shrill reverberations as though advising her master to stay vigilant.

Leaping to the floor, Alice ran to the living room from the bedroom and forced open the entrance door. The cold night air immediately blew in. A strange smell was mixed into the wind that normally smelled only of the forest. It seemed to prick into the depths of her nose; the stench of something burnt—

Alice jumped down onto the front yard still barefooted. She drew a sharp breath the moment she turned about, scanning through the night sky.

The skies to the west were aflame.

The ominous vermillion glow was unmistakably reflected from some humongous inferno. She focused her eye and spotted numerous trails of black smoke across the starry sky.

—A bushfire!?

She retracted that thought an instant after it came to her. Aboard the burnt, pungent wind faintly reaching her was the noise of metallic clangs—and a clamor of screams.

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An enemy assault.

The Dark Territory forces were attacking Rulid Village.

"...Selka!!"

A hoarse cry escaped from Alice and she dashed back to the house. However, she stood petrified just as she got on the porch.

She had to save her little sister and parents.

But what about the other villagers?

If she tried her best to save everyone, she would need to fight the forces of darkness head-on. But did the strength to do so still remain in her current self?

The source of Alice the integrity knight was her almost blind loyalty for the Axiom Church and the Highest Minister. Now that she lost that faith along with her right eye, could she truly swing the Fragrant Olive Sword and use her sacred arts?

Standing frozen, Alice's ears—

Picked up a *gatan*, from within the cabin.

Her left eye flashed wide open. A chair fell over in the middle of the dim living room and beside it was a black-haired youth crawling on the floor.

"...Kirito..."

Alice moved her paralyzed legs and entered the cabin.

The light of determination was absent as usual from Kirito's eyes. That said, the motive for his sluggish movement was evident. His one, extended arm reached out straight towards the three swords hung on the wall.

"Kirito... you..."

Something hot was caught between her chest and throat. It took some time before she noticed what faintly warped her sight were tears.

"...Ah... aah..."

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Kirito's frame moved without pause as his hoarse voice escaped, desperately approaching the swords. Alice swiped at her eyes, then ran straight to the youth and raised his frail body up from the floor.

"Everything will be fine, I will go. I will save the villagers. So please settle down and wait for me here."

Quickly whispering so, Alice drew Kirito into a tight hug.

Thump. *Thump*. The reverberations of his heart beats reached her from their touching chests.

A persistent willpower definitely lurked in those beats even with his heart closed off. Even as indistinct embers, they still transmitted distinct warmth to Alice's body.

Alice pressed their cheeks together tightly before gently bringing him up and sitting him on a chair.

"I will be back immediately after saving them."

She spoke again, and then first took her armor and sword belt out from the closet where they were this whole time before equipping them atop her sleepwear. Rushing over the eastern wall next, she grasped her beloved sword without hesitation.

The Fragrant Olive Sword weighed down her two hands as they held it for the first time in half a year. Attaching its scabbard's metal clasp onto her sword belt, she threw an overcoat on while sticking her feet into boots, then ran down onto the front yard again.

"Amayori!!"

A gigantic silhouette flew out at once, lowering her head, after she called out towards the bed in the east.

Alice commanded in a keen voice after leaping onto the base of her long neck.

"Go!!"

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Her pair of silver wings beat loudly and the flying dragon lifted straight off into the night sky after a short ground run.

She could clearly see the catastrophe in Rulid after gaining a little altitude. The grandly rising flames were mainly from the village's north end. The aggressors likely did come from the Dark Territory through the mountain range at the edge after all.

Eldrie had said that there were no abnormalities at the «North Cave», blocked on Bercouli's orders, last night. The numbers required to be mobilized for removing all that rubble in a single day definitely exceeded a mere ten or twenty.

It seemed small units had been sneaking in via the three caves through the mountain range at the edge under the cover of night to commit evil deeds since times long past. Kirito and Eugeo had claimed that they fought a group of goblins in the northern cave before they arrived at the central capital too. However, she had never heard of an attack this extensive yet bold. The whole of the land of darkness might truly be thinking that the time is ripe for an all-out assault on the Human World.

Amayori flew over the dense forest in a single go and arrived at the skies over the wheat fields at Rulid's outskirts even as such thoughts went through Alice's mind.

She had no reins, but she still conveyed her instructions to hover by lightly tapping the dragon's nape.

Alice leaned forward and focused her eye on the village's state. The main street crossing from south to north shone red with flames on its northern end and she could spot the distinct shadows of the advancing attackers. The nimble goblins dashed as though they were leaping forward. The large orcs, too, advanced with a short distance from them.

An impromptu blockade was built from furniture and lumber piled up immediately north of the central plaza, but the goblin vanguards had already reached there and their drawn swords flickering in the light struck as one to pass the obstacle.

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The ones fighting back were of the village's guard corps. However, they were likely surpassed by even the goblins: be it in numbers, in equipment, or in experience. At this rate, it would take but a brief moment before the orc unit, causing tremors as they approached from behind, pulverized them.

Holding back her desire to dive into the midst of that battle this very moment, she continued checking the situation.

Flames rose all about the eastern and western sides of the village as well. It seemed to have yet suffer damage from the plaza to the south, however. Aside from the guards, the other villagers—including Selka, of course—must have fled from the south gate and evacuated to the forest.

Alice focused her eye on the plaza once more with that thought in mind and could not help but to let out her voice.

"Why...!?"

There were countless silhouettes sticking close to the central fountain, surrounding it in the circular plaza before the church. It escaped her immediate notice as there were far too many of them. Nearly the whole of Rulid's inhabitants must have been gathered there.

Why did they not escape from the village?

The guards would certainly be crushed in no time when the attackers' main force reaches the blockade. Unless they begin moving straight away, it would be too late to evacuate.

Alice tapped the flying dragon's neck again and shouted out a line after moving right above the plaza.

"Amayori, standby here until I call!"

And she jumped from the height of several tens of mel without the slightest hesitation. The hem of her overcoat blew violently as she fell, slicing through the cold night air.

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The villagers, numbering an overwhelming three hundred, who huddled in a circle might have been prepared to put up a fight as there were men positioned on the edge carrying farm implements such as spades and scythes. Alice landed right beside two men who shot off orders from the side.

The stone paving cracked in a radial pattern with a thunderous roar. An intense shock ran from the sole of her feet to her head and her Life probably fell somewhat, but that was as far as it went.

The two men—the wealthy farmer, Nygr Barbossa, and Rulid Village's chief, Gasupht—had their words scared out of them by the silhouette suddenly falling from above.

Though Alice felt her breath momentarily stop upon seeing her father's face, she recovered quick enough to take advantage of the silence she caused and shouted out.

"You will not be able to hold them back here! Evacuate all of the villagers through the southern road at once!!"

The shock grew on the men's faces as they heard Alice's instructions.

But what came out from Nygr's mouth after he came to his senses was a throaty, harsh voice.

"Don't be stupid! How can we run away and abandon my mansion… this village?!!"

Alice refuted the wealthy farmer, veins popping from his brow, in a sharp tone.

"You can still escape from the goblins' reach now! What is more important, your assets or your life?!"

Replacing Nygr who could grunt in reply, Gasupht the village chief let out his voice, deep and tense.

"Fortifying our defenses in a circular formation was the instruction from the guards' chief, Jink. Even I, the village chief, have to abide by his orders in such a situation. That is the empire's law."

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Alice was the one who went speechless this time.

During emergencies, the one who acceded to the sacred task of the guard chief gains a temporary authority to command all residents of a village or town in place of its leader. That provision certainly existed on the empire law of Norlangarth North Empire.

However, the guard chief named Jink was a youngling who only recently inherited his sacred task from his father. It was doubtful he could maintain his composure and assume command under such abnormal circumstances. The pronounced anxiety on Gasupht's face showed that he, too, thought so inside.

That said, the empire's laws were absolute to the villagers. She could only have Jink, commanding the defensive line fighting at the north side of the plaza, pull back and change his orders to start the evacuation at once, but there was clearly insufficient time.

What? What could she—

The cry of a young yet resolute voice reached Alice's ears then, as she stood frozen.

"Let's do as big sister says, father!!"

Looking back forward with a gasp, she saw a short sister healing the burnt villagers with sacred arts.

"...Selka!"

Thank goddess, she was fine; Alice took a step forward towards her beloved little sister, but Selka stood up and weaved through the crowd to the trio.

After showing a brief smile towards Alice, Selka's facial expressions immediately tensed up as she spoke to Gasupht.

"Father, have big sister ever been wrong even once? No, even I can tell. At this rate, everyone will die!"

"But... but still..."

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Gasupht stammered with a bitter expression. His moustache, stained with white, quivered slightly and his sight wandered futilely through empty space.

Taking the place of the village chief who went speechless, Nygr Barbossa erupted once more in anger.

"This is no place for a child to meddle!! We will protect this village!!"

His two bloodshot eyes stared at the Barbossas' mansion built near the plaza. What was on Nygr's mind was unmistakably the mass of wheat just harvested in autumn and the gold coins hoarded over many years.

Returning his sight towards Alice and Selka, the farmer, naturally enough, yelled out shrilly.

"Yes... yes, I've got it! You are the one who invited those beasts from the land of darkness to this village, aren't you, Alice?!! You were defiled by the darkness's power when you crossed the mountain range at the edge in the past!! You witch... this girl must be a terrible witch!!"

Alice lost her words, jabbed by that fat finger. The clamor from the villagers, the clashes between weapons resounding from the defense line, and the war cries from the monsters closing in from the north all felt far away.

Since she began living in the village's outskirts, Alice had countlessly fell the forest's gigantic trees on Nygr's request. This man had practically writhed to thank her each time. And yet, he could still spew those words as his family's fortunes occupied his entire time; how could—

Alice averted her eye from the middle-aged man with an expression much like the evil countenance of the orcs and murmured inside.

—How about you deal with it on your own?

—I will simply do as I like. I will take Selka, the elderly Garitta, my parents, and Kirito away from this village and search for a new home somewhere far away.

She grinded her teeth audibly; she lowered her eyelids.

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Her stream of thoughts put forth an opposing view.

—But the foolishness Nygr Barbossa and the other villagers displays was created by the rule by the Axiom Church over hundreds of years.

The masses were bound by countless principles and laws under the Taboo Index and while they were granted a tepid peace, something important was steadily stolen from them.

That would be their ability to think, and to fight.

Where had that imperceptible power, plundered from the masses over endless years and months, accumulated?

Within the integrity knights who numbered merely thirty-one.

After she took in a deep breath and let it out, the force Alice's left eye flashed open with practically made a noise.

Nygr's face abruptly turned pale, as if from fright, in her sight.

In contrast, Alice felt a mysterious energy overflowing from within. A power like a flame burning blue-white, quiet yet hotter than all other. The power that she thought lost at the end of that battle on the cathedral's highest floor—one that led Kirito, Eugeo, and Alice to face off the Human World's mightiest ruler.

Alice took in a deep breath and announced.

"...I will revoke Guard Chief Jink's order. I shall have every villager gathered in this plaza retreat to the southern forest with those bearing arms at in front."

Her tone was gentle, but Nygr's upper body bent back as though hit by some unseen hand. Nonetheless, one could still say his courage was admirable with how he still replied in a quivering tone.

"By... by what right can a girl who was drove away-"

"The authority of a knight."

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"Wha... what knight!? This village has no such sacred task! Even if you can swinging a sword around a little, do you know what will happen should the esteemed knights in the capital hear about you just claiming to be one...?"

Alice gave Nygr, frothing as he continued screaming, a firm look as she gripped her overcoat at her right shoulder with her left hand.

"I am... My name is Alice. Third among the Axiom Church's integrity knights, overseeing the Centoria City Region, Alice Synthesis Thirty!!"

She tore the overcoat from herself as she loudly announced her name.

The moment the thick cloth her entire frame was clad in was taken off, her golden armor and Fragrant Olive Sword gleamed brightly as they reflected the blazing flames.

"Wha... an, an i-integrity knight...!?"

Nygr fell on his rear while looking upwards as a voice, now completely shrill, leaked from him. Gasupht's eyes opened wide as well.

Alice's proclamation of her name could not have been a lie. After all, there could not be any in this world who could pass themselves off as an integrity knight—none who could disobey the authority of the Axiom Church. Kirito and Alice were probably the only two capable of doing so, but it was not as if Alice abandoned her sword, the proof of her knighthood, even after escaping here from the central capital.

The villagers making a din around, too, fell silent. The swords clashing at the defense line in the north as well as the war cries of the guards and goblins, too, felt far away.

What broke that silence first was a whisper from Selka.

"Big... sister...?"

Turning her left eye towards her little sister who had her two hands grasped together before her chest, Alice smiled gently.

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"I am sorry for keeping it from you all this time, Selka. This is the real punishment given to me. And—my real duty."

Tear droplets appeared from Selka's eyes upon hearing those words.

"Big sister… I…. I always believed in you. That you were never a criminal. You are beautiful… so, very…"

The next to act was Gasupht.

Kneeling down on the stone paving with a firm noise, the village chief shouted with a strained voice while looking downwards.

"Your will shall be done, esteemed integrity knight!!"

Quickly getting up, he turned back to the villagers behind and issued clear instructions.

"Everyone, stand!! Those bearing arms shall lead the way, run to the south gate!! Once you are out of the village, escape to the forest south of the cleared land!!"

An uneasy stir ran through the villagers standing stiffly. But that, too, lasted but a brief moment. The villagers had no option to resist orders from the village chief in the first place; all the more so when it was the will of an integrity knight.

The muscular peasants fortifying the surrounding stood up and urged the women, children, and elderly to stand as well. Alice called to Gasupht who joined in at the head of the pack to stop and spoke in a hushed voice.

"Father, please take care of everyone… of Selka and mother."

Gasupht's stern expression quavered for a mere instant and he gave a terse reply.

"……Do take care of yourself too, esteemed knight."

This father would likely never ever call Alice his daughter again. That, too, was part of her payment for the power she was granted. Carving that into her heart, Alice pushed Selka's back and made her go along with Gasupht.

"Big sister… don't work yourself too hard, please."

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Alice smiled as she nodded to her little sister whose eyes were still watery, and then turned towards the north. The villagers moved off as one behind her.

"Ah... aah... m-my mansion..."

That pathetic moan came from Nygr Barbossa whose rear was still on the ground. His gaze flickered between the villagers running off and his mansion where the flames were closing in towards. Deciding to leave him alone, she focused on the overall state of the village.

She did succeed in setting the villagers into action, but they still numbered three hundred. It would take time for them all to escape from the village. But the defense line was reaching the end of its rope and besides, the enemy's footsteps approached from the east and west too.

A young man's shout, much like a scream, rang out from the north side of the plaza then.

"We can't hold on any longer! Retreat! Retrea—at!!"

The voice belonged to Guard Chief Jink. Nygr stood up upon hearing that, as though revitalized, and flared up Alice.

"Look... just look at that! We should have stayed in the plaza and defended! We will get killed! They will murder all of uss!!"

Alice shrugged her shoulder and refuted calmly.

"No need to worry; there is all this space. I will hold them back here."

"As if you can! You can't possibly do it, not a chance! Even if... even if you are really an integrity knight, what can you do alone against so many of those demons?!!"

Nygr still continued crying out despite the goblins' horrifying silhouettes already pressing in from the east and west. Ignoring him yet again, Alice glanced behind. The last of the villagers were still in the plaza, though enough of a distance from Alice and the rest in the center.

Chapter 15 - *In Northern Lands*

Alice gripped Nygr firmly from his nape and pushed him towards the south. That hand thrust straight into the night sky and she called her beloved dragon's name out loud.

"Amayori!"

A mighty roar immediately returned from the skies. Swinging her raised right hand down from the west to the east, she then shouted.

"—Burn them to ashes!!"

The noise of flapping wings poured down like a storm and Nygr, standing still, along with the grotesque demi-humans charging into the plaza—the goblins—looked straight up at the same time.

The gigantic flying dragon diving through the skies, dyed red by flames, opened its jaw wide. A bluish-white gleam flickered from deep in its throat—

Shubaa!!

That resounded as a glaring light came forth. The heat ray that made contact with the west streets mowed down the east streets as well, cutting through before Alice and Barbossa's eyes as they stood on the southern side of the plaza.

Time stopped briefly.

Terrible flames swelled up along a line and freed themselves into the night skies. The goblins swallowed up were blasted up high with shrill screams.

The heat ray that instantaneously slaughtered over twenty of the aggressors while vaporizing the fountain in the middle of the plaza and thick white smoke rolled out into the surroundings. Amayori flew off, skimming atop it, and Alice called out instructions to standby before glancing her eye behind.

Nygr collapsed back onto the stove paving, perhaps due to the strength in his waist leaving him, with his two eyes peeled.

"Wha... whaa... a.... a, a d-dragon...!?"

Chapter 15 - *In Northern Lands*

Alice was wondering what happened to the middle-aged man whose slackened cheeks went into spasm before desperate footsteps approached from beyond the hanging steam. The ones who appeared, all clad in leather armor, were the men from Rulid's guard corps. The decision to beat a hasty retreat was a good call as their condition showed; despite suffering slight wounds, none were hurt badly among the several tens of guards.

Chapter 15 - *In Northern Lands*

A young man with a large frame who admirably ran at their end—Guard Chief Jink—noticed the plaza was mostly empty and shouted with a shocked face.

“W-Where have everyone from the village went!? Didn’t I tell them to fortify their defenses here!?”

“I had them retreat to the southern forest.”

Alice answered and he blinked as though just noticing her existence. His sight shifted between her head and feet countless time as he spoke, dumbfounded.

“You… Alice…? Why are you…?”

“There is no time to explain. Is this all of the guards? Are there any left behind?”

“Ah… yes, I believe so…”

“Then please escape along with everyone. Aah, and take Barbossa there with you.”

“B-But… they are right behind……”

Before his words finished—

“Gihii——!!”

A vulgar roar rang through the entire plaza.

“Wheree!! Where did you go, white iumss!!”

The ones who broke through the thick fog as they rushed into the plaza were goblins clad in coarse plate armor with long feathers on their heads, holding machetes similar to lumps of metal in their right hands. These seemed of a different tribe, having a slightly better physique when compared to those who appeared from the side streets earlier and were incinerated by Amayori’s flames.

Alice stared at the demi-humans as she placed her right hand on her cherished sword’s grip. Flying dragons could not fire their heat rays in succession. Alice had to face the enemy on her own until Amayori stockpiled the thermal elements within herself again.

Chapter 15 - *In Northern Lands*

One of the goblins noticed Alice who was clad in golden armor, and the colors of bloodthirstiness and lust welled up in his eyes shining golden as he cried out.

“Gihii!! A ium giirl! Kill heer! Kill her and eat heer!!”

Quietly taking on the demi-human who charged straight towards her while brandishing a machete with his abnormally long arm, Alice murmured deep in her chest.

—What a terrible power I was given. My very existence is practically a sin.

This body of an integrity knight.

“Gyaa——!!”

The heavy machete swung down as he leapt and was caught by Alice who carelessly extended her left hand. Though she felt an immense impact through her naked palm, it neither broke her bones nor tore her skin. Gripping the blunt blade with her five fingers, she crushed it as though it was nothing more than thin ice.

Even before the metallic fragments, broken and scattered far too easily, fell to the ground, the Fragrant Olive Sword was already drawn by her right hand and tore a horizontal line through the goblin’s torso.

The bright golden air from the sword swept in three goblins approaching from behind and blew away the cluster of dense vapor as well in no time at all. The four enemy soldiers’ golden eyeballs were peeled open, as though unaware of what had occurred, while their upper body left their lower body before they could let out a single word, collapsing haphazardly onto the ground.

Avoiding the blood that shot up a moment later, she muttered to herself within once more.

—Highest Minister Administrator. You were wrong, after all.

—You collected all this power into merely thirty integrity knights and made them puppets without a will of their own. You thought to grasp all of the power that should had been split between the masses of the Human World through that.

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However, this far too ill-distributed strength served only to delude and mislead both its owners and those around them. Like how you were swallowed by that overwhelming might and lost your humanity…

That mistake was now beyond redemption with the loss of the highest minister.

Thus, at the very least, she had to expend every last drop of this strength for the masses.

Not as an integrity knight of the Axiom Church, but as a single swordswoman; she had to think on her own and fight on her own will. Like how those two brave swordsmen did.

Her left eye was shut throughout that swing; Alice opened it with resolve.

At the same time, the defense line hastily built at the plaza's north was smashed into small pieces from the other side.

The invaders' main unit charged in as though to bury the wide main streets. The goblins numbered over fifty and were accompanied, though in lesser numbers, by orcs whose giant, plump frames were covered in thick iron armor, each with a trident in a hand.

Upon seeing them whose golden eyes gleamed, aflame, and roars filled with hate and desire, moans of despair leaked from Jink, the other guards, and Nygr Barbossa.

But Alice's heart was at ease.

She relied not on the talent for battle she obtained as an integrity knight. Not even a knight could escape with light wounds if they were to surround by such numbers and stabbed by their spears.

What gave Alice strength was a new realization.

—I will fight for what I, myself, seek for from now on. I will fight to protect my little sister and my parents, along with the people of the Human World who Kirito and Eugeo hoped to protect.

Chapter 15 - *In Northern Lands*

Alice vividly felt the remaining doubts about herself and her sense of futility disappear into a white light deep in her heart. That light surged through her, finally accumulating at her right eye, covered by that black patch, and generating an intense heat.

"……!"

She clenched her teeth as she withstood a fierce pain that shot to her eye socket from the back of her head. But that pain somehow nostalgic, or heartrending. Alice gripped the bandage across her head with her left hand and took it off all at once.

Her right eyelid that had been closed since that day nearly half a year ago opened slowly. A red light expanded from the center of her dark vision and eventually turned into flicking flames. Visions of houses lit aflame overlapped and gradually closed in on each other—finally finishing as one.

Alice looked at the black cloth held in her left hand with both eyes.

Kirito made the eye patch, discolored from being washed many times, by tearing it from his clothes. The cloth that protected her for months ever since her right eye shot away along with that seal might have finally reached the end of its Life here as it began to disappear from its edges as melting into the air. Alice came to a realization while staring at that fleeting, beautiful sight.

She thought she was looking after Kirito who had lost his right arm and heart through this half-year. However, she was actually the one protected instead.

"…Thank you, Kirito."

Pressing the black cloth to her lips immediately before it utterly vanished, she whispered softly.

"…I am fine now. I will likely still be at a loss, worry, and lose heart in the future… but I will go on. For us both to achieve our goal."

Her head flipped up just as the cloth disintegrated.

Chapter 15 - *In Northern Lands*

Her two eyes gazed at the distinct sight of nearly a hundred goblins and orcs letting out a multitude of roars as they flooded forward. The fleeing footsteps from the guards and Nygr Barbossa echoed from behind.

There was no fear in Alice's heart as she faced the enemy army on her own.

Breathing the burnt stench deeply, she yelled.

"—I am a knight of the Human World, Alice!! None of the blood or slaughter you seek shall happen while I stand here!! Return to your land through the caves you came from this instant!!"

As though awed by her refined, distinct shout, the goblins running at the head slackened slightly. However, a large orc in the middle of the group, possibly the general, immediately brandished his two-handed axe with a brutal roar.

"Graaahh!! «Cut-Feet Moricca» here will have that one little white ium girl on her knees before long!!"

The voice gave strength to the goblins. Alice put a decent amount of distance between her and the enemy army charging in as a massive black wave—

"Amayori!"

A huge shadow rapidly dived from the skies the moment she called out that name. Though the thermal elements accumulated were not enough for firing the heat ray yet, the flying dragon intimidated the demi-humans with her body and thunderous call while savagely skimming past their heads. The anxiety of the astonished enemy army rose beyond earlier.

Not letting that chance escape, Alice raised the Fragrant Olive Sword held in her right up high and shouted.

"*—Enhance armament!!*"

It was half a year since she last chanted those words of the «armament full control art», not to mention how she shortened the main body of the art, but Alice's beloved sword responded to her will. The golden blade divided into countless small

edges with a clear metallic noise and soared into the night sky while reflecting the fires' glow.

"Rage—flowers!"

The golden storm of flowers fell upon the enemy army with numerous *zaa*s.

The first to be wrapped in a spray of blood was the orc general who called himself Moricca. His entire body was stabbed through by many petals, instantly robbing him of his Life, and he fell onto the ground with a tremor. The orcs around him, too, bent down onto the ground with screams one after another.

The Fragrant Olive Sword was a sacred tool among sacred tools with the world's oldest tree rooted to the core of the Human World before the world began as its source. As its alternate name, «Eternal Immortality», implied, even when divided into hundreds of flower petals through its armament full control art, each held a priority on par with famous swords forged by artisans. Coarse cast iron armor could not possibly defend against them.

The invaders became restless at losing their main force, including their general, in an instant. The charge's momentum weakened before long and came to a stop around ten mel from the plaza.

Alice sharply swung her right hand that held her sword's grip at the goblins lined up at the front, lost at whether to obey their greed or fear. The hundreds of petals danced through the air with light *zaa*s, forming dense vertical stripes between Alice and the enemy army.

Alice gave a subdued proclamation while gazing at the demi-humans through the fence gleaming golden.

"This is the wall dividing the Human World and the Land of Darkness. Even if you dig through the caves, you will not defile this earth as long as we knights live. Choose—to advance and fall into a sea of blood, or to retreat and flee back to the Land of Darkness!!"

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Not even five seconds passed before the goblin vanguards turned back with great force.

3

A vibrant ensemble of hammers whirled up into the clear, blue winter sky.

Alice lifted her hand to her brow and looked at circular Rulid Village towering beyond the wheat fields.

Today marked a quick one week since the army of darkness's assault.

Many of the houses built in the north of the village were burnt down, but with the village chief's decision to put nearly every villager's sacred task on hold to work on that, the progress of their reconstruction was rapid. Twenty-one of them had unfortunately escaped too late and lost their lives, and a joint funeral service was held for them at the church three days earlier.

After attending the service as she was requested to, Alice rode her flying dragon to the northern cave to confirm its status.

The long cave that should had been collapsed on Bercouli's orders was dug out to such an extent that even the orcs' giant frames could easily pass through and the area closest to the Dark Territory showed signs they camped over many nights.

The attackers did not hollow out the cave in a single night. They must have repeatedly collapsed the entrance after sending into a party of combat engineers from the Dark Territory. Thus, there would have already been a concealed group of goblins within, steadily working at it, when Integrity Knight Eldrie checked the entrance.

Care and wariness unbelievable from the goblins and orcs of old. This invasion could be surmised to be no mere reconnaissance, like those done many times before, by that alone.

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Instead of collapsing the cave once again, Alice dammed the small river flowing from middle which previously served as a white dragon's nest for a time and completely flooded the interior of the cave. Next unleashing the countless cryogenic elements she generated beforehand, she sealed the cave with ice rather than stone.

Now, no one could pass the cave without an art user on par with Alice generating thermal elements to melt the ice.

Taking her sight off Rulid Village and the white mountain range at the edge rising beyond it, Alice fastened the last bag of her belongings to Amayori's left leg.

"Erm… big sister."

Selka, who had been helping out with her preparations for departure with an adamant smile so far, opened her mouth while looking downwards.

"…Father actually wanted to see you off too. He was all absent-minded since today morning, you know? …I believe he must have been glad inside that you came back, big sister. I want you to believe in that at least."

"I know, Selka."

Alice hugged her little sister's petite body and whispered in return.

"I left this village as a heinous criminal and returned as an integrity knight. But next time… when I am done with all my duties, I will be back as simply Alice Schuberg. That would be when I truly can say this. *I am back, father*."

"…Okay. That day will come for sure, right?"

Selka murmured with a watery voice, raised her face, and then wiped it with the cuff of her apprentice clothes.

Turning about, she called out to the black-haired young man sitting on a wheelchair by the side with as cheery a voice as she could muster.

"You stay well too, Kirito. Hurry up and recover and help big sister out, you hear me?"

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Holding his lowered head with both hands, the sister, young in terms of age, drew a charm of blessing before she took several steps back.

Alice approached Kirito, then gently took the two swords from under his arm and stored them in the bag placed on the saddle on Amayori. Following that, she lifted Kirito, who had grown thin, easily and sat him down on the front part of the saddle.

She did ponder leaving Kirito in the village under Selka's care. After all, if they were to proceed to the Great East Gate which would likely become the decisive battlegrounds against the forces of darkness, Alice would be occupied as a member of the Human World Defense Army and unable to attend to Kirito throughout the day like what she had been doing.

But still, she decided to bring him along.

Kirito definitely tried to take up his sword and head for the village on the night of the attack a week ago. The will to fight for another still remained within Kirito. Thus, the battlegrounds to protect the Human World could be where best to find the means to regain his former spirit.

Should the need arise, she would protect him even if it required her to strap him to her back with leather.

Alice gave her little sister whom she held dear one last firm embrace.

"...I will be going, then, Selka."

"Yes. Take care... and be sure to come back, big sister."

"I promise. ...Please give my regards to Garitta-san too. ...Stay well and focus on your studies."

"I know. I'll become a fine sister for sure... and one day, I'll also..."

Selka trailed off there and showed a disheveled, tearful smile.

Gently stroking her little sister's head before releasing her, Alice endured her reluctance to leave as she walked to her beloved dragon and rode immediately behind where Kirito sat on the saddle.

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She nodded to her little sister on the ground and faced the blue skies.

The reins lightly rang out and the dragon began her ground run between the wheat fields with strength that showed no sign of the two humans and three swords weighing her down.

She would definitely return to this village one day.

Even if she were to fall on the battlefield, her spirit would still return; it surely would.

Alice shook off a drop of tear in her eyelashes and yelled out in a crisp voice.

"...Hah!"

Softly.

The sensation of floating came as they left the ground.

Having grasped an updraft, Amayori circled as she dashed into the sky.

The vast fields and forests; Rulid Village in their middle with a brand new roof gleaming at its core; Selka waving both hands as she earnestly ran; she burnt the sight of them all into her eyelids—

Alice had the flying dragon turn its head towards the eastern skies.

Chapter 16 - Attack on the Ocean Turtle

Chapter 16

Attack on the Ocean Turtle
July 2026[1]

1

Even the self-proclaimed super genius Higa Takeru was unable to predict all that had happened in the past two hours.

But, the current situation could be called extremely startling, and could only be described as dumbfounding.

Unexpectedly, a delicate young woman of roughly eighteen or nineteen used her thin right hand to seize and hoist up the collar of a man fifteen centimeters taller than herself. The tasteless Hawaiian shirt was gripped so tightly it was nearly torn apart; heels of sandals floated in the air.

With both eyes, brightly flashing as though they were ablaze, staring straight at Lieutenant-Colonel Kikuoka Seijirou, Yuuki Asuna let words sharp as swords out of her cute cherry red lips:

“If Kirito-kun can’t wake up like this, I will absolutely never forgive you.”

From Higa’s position, it was impossible to see Kikuoka’s expression under his black-rimmed glasses reflecting the ceiling light. But the Self-Defense Cadre who was supposed to be a black belt in both judo and kendo was seemingly crushed by Asuna’s words; he swallowed, and slowly raised both hands to his left and right, as though in a gesture of surrender.

“I understand. I will take responsibility: I will make sure Kirito-kun recovers.”

Solemn silence flooded the dark Auxiliary Control Room.

[1] defan's translations

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No matter if it was Higa, who was sitting in the chair in front of the console, or Koujiro Rinko, who was standing beside him, or the numerous «RATH» staff inside the room, no one dared to speak. It was clear how surprising the the youngest woman's verve was. As it was, that young woman deserved the title of a «Survivor» of a true battlefield. Higa couldn't help but think this aside.

Finally, Asuna wordlessly released her right hand. Kikuoka, having been freed, let out a long sigh with an almost dispirited expression. Asuna stepped back, swaying on the spot. Rinko immediately moved forward and supported Asuna's back, her white coat flying.

The female physicist who was a senior to Higa in the research facility tightly hugged Asuna to her chest, whispered with determination:

"It's all right, everything will be fine. He'll definitely come back, back to your side."

Her gentle voice instantly soothed Asuna's extremely taut face:

"... Yes, you're right. I'm sorry... for being so panicky."

Asuna's eyes leaked tears that had been absent even when enduring the attack. Rinko gently wiped them away with the tip of her finger.

The sound of the sliding door being opened tightened the slightly relaxed atmosphere again. Running into the room was Lieutenant Nakanishi.

Nakanishi, whose dusty white shirt was soaked with sweat and whose shoulder holster revealed a large pistol grip, glanced at Rinko and Asuna and said loudly to Kikuoka behind:

"Report! Complete sealing of blast doors one and two, plus completion of evacuating noncombatants are confirmed!"

Kikuoka adjusted the collar of his Hawaiian shirt as he stepped forward and nodded.

"Good work. How long can the blast doors hold?"

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“Yes… That would depend on the attackers’ equipment, although small firearms are unable to penetrate it. Even using tip saws or similar tools to cut through it would take at least eight hours. If explosives are used, it might not hold… I assume, though, they would not, since near the central blast door…”

“There is the light cube cluster.”

Kikuoka finished his sentence, pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, and sank into deep thought.

But he immediately raised his head and surveyed the slightly small Auxiliary Control Room.

“Good, let’s straighten out the situation. Nakanishi, report of casualties.”

“Yes sir. Civilian research team, three lightly injured, in treatment at the bow infirmary. Our combatants, two heavily injured, two lightly injured, all in treatment with no risk of death. Ready for combat, six, including two lightly injured.”

“Under that kind of fierce attack, it’s a miracle that there have been no deaths… Then, report any hull damage.”

“There are rupture points all over the bottom dock control room. It’s impossible to shut them remotely now. The passageway from the dock to the Main Control Room is the same, but these are just negligible damages. The most severe is, because the main power line has been cut… although the auxiliary line can supply stable power, if we don’t restart the control system we can’t turn the propellers.”

“A sea turtle without fins. And its belly has been bitten by a shark.”

“Yes, sir. Zones One through Twelve of the Lower Shaft and the bottom dock have been completely taken.”

The extremely short-haired Nakanishi, whose face represented strong will itself, unwillingly knitted his brow. Comparatively, Kikuoka’s teacher-like long hairline twisted up, as he leaned onto the console while shuffling his clogs with his toes.

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“The Main Control Room, STL Room One, and even the nuclear pile have also fallen into their hands… Most fortunately, their goal is not to destroy.”

“Is… is that so?”

“If they just wanted to destroy, they wouldn’t use submarines to carry out such an exaggerated surprise attack. Striking us with a cruise missile or torpedo would do. That begs the question: who are they… Higa-kun, what do you think?”

At the sudden question, Higa blinked several times, turning his brain that had not yet fully recovered from the impact.

“Uhh, yes, yeah.”

Mumbling meaninglessly as he turned towards the console, he manipulated the mouse with his right hand and brought up an in-ship camera recording on the big monitor.

Although the video window he opened was dark and indistinct, he paused at a random place and adjusted the brightness and contrast. What appeared were a number of figures in combat suits, sprinting forward in a passageway inside the ship. Their faces were half covered by helmets with multi-function visors, and they wielded serious-looking assault rifles.

“…So, as you can see, from head to toe, there are no markings whatsoever, such as flags, that can identify them. From the color and specifications of their equipment, they don’t seem to belong to any regular army. Their rifles appear to be Steyrs, but those are quite common… The only thing we can say is that, from their average physiques, they’re most likely not Asian.”

“Which means, at least they aren’t Japanese Special Forces. How pleasing.”

Kikuoka talked offhandedly about the frightening situation while scratching his chin. Emitting a sharp aura from his calm eyes usually squinted, he looked up to the monitor.

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“We can confirm one more thing… These people know the existence of Project Alicization.”

Higa nodded.

“Yeah, that’s right. After their assault from the bottom dock, they immediately ran to the Main Control Room. Their goal is crystal clear: to seize the STL technology… No, the true bottom-up AI «A.L.I.C.E.».”

In other words, information had severely leaked in long-term work. But Higa did not directly say it; he resisted the urge to scan the face of every «RATH» worker in the room for any sudden motions, and said in an optimistic tone:

“What’s fortunate is, the Main Control Room lock caught up. It’s securer than physically damaging the console; I’ve made sure direct commands to the Underworld aren’t working anymore. Any intervention towards the simulated experiment, and the ejection of the Fluctlight of «Alice» from the Light Cube Cluster just can’t be done.”

“But, it’s the same for us, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. Using this auxiliary console, we can’t execute administrator privilege commands either. No matter if it’s from the opposite side – the Main Control Room – or this side – the Auxiliary Control Room – it is impossible to eject «Alice»’s Fluctlight by way of external commands… But Kiku-san, doesn’t this equal our victory? See, they can’t access the Cluster by physical means or informational means, as long as we wait until our escort Aegis destroyer to dispatch reinforcements for a counterattack, those guys are a piece of cake, a piece of cake.”

“I don’t know what kind of cake… but therein lies the problem.”

Kikuoka’s expression remained solemn as he inquired Nakanishi.

“How about it, has the *Nagato* moved?”

“Uh… about that…”

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Nakanishi channeled power into his chin in an effort to steady his voice, and bowed his head slightly.

"The *Nagato* received orders from the Yokosuka Fleet Command to maintain its current distance and standby. It seems that Command has classified us as hostages."

"Wh…"

Higa's mouth dropped open.

"Hostages? But, all hands have retreated back here in an evacuation!"

The one who replied calmly was Kikuoka:

"I'm afraid, those people clad in black have connections with the higher-ups of the Self Defense Force. The *Nagato* pulled away from the Ocean Turtle at eight in the morning, about six hours before that bunch broke in. By the time *Nagato* receives an order to come to rescue, they would have seized «Alice»'s Light Cube. Of course, there must be a time limit…"

"That means… those people aren't just normal terrorists. This is bad… If there are experts on the other side as well, they might find out. The hidden way of collecting Alice…"

"Operating from within the Underworld, right?… Now that they have control over STL Room One, it's possible to set the virtual console installed within the Underworld to complete the ejection command…"

"What will happen if that command is executed?"

Higa turned around and answered Koujiro Rinko's question:

"The target Light Cube will be retrieved from the Light Cube Cluster within the Main Shaft and transported by vacuum tube to any control room. It'll exit there."

He pointed at a square hatch on the side of the console, and turned his eyes towards the door on the wall inside.

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There was a small metal plaque set on the aluminum door, with the words [STL Room Two].

On the other side of that door there were two STLs – that is, «Soul Translators». In one of the machines laid a youth currently under the care of Nurse and Sergeant First Class Aki Natsuki. He, Kirigaya Kazuto, had been playing an important role since the beginning of Project Alicization, and drove the direction of the project even more so today.

Kikuoka turned away and crossed his arms, speaking in a sincere and solemn tone:

“Our last hope will have to rest on his shoulders again. Higa-kun… How is Kirito’s condition?”

Hearing the weak breathing, Higa raised his head and directly met eyes with the intense glare of Asuna, who was being hugged by Rinko.

He sank into a hesitation over how to convey the current situation to her, who was Kirito’s, that is, Kirigaya Kazuto’s lover. Immediately, however, a hoarse but determined voice reached Higa’s ears.

“Don’t worry, I will be fine. Please say it, the true situation.”

Taking a deep breath, Higa nodded.

“To summarize in one sentence… It’s gonna be… It would be a condition just shy of the worst possible.”

Higa said in a newly serious tone, manipulating the mouse again.

The image of the attackers disappeared and another window was opened. What appeared was an irregularly flashing colorful stereoscopic image.

“This, is an imaging of Kirito-kun’s Fluctlight.”

Everyone in the room silently stared at the screen.

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"A week ago, since he was injected with succinylcholine in Tokyo, his heart and lungs ceased normal function. Fortunately, he has managed to stay alive, but a portion of his brain… Specifically, his Fluctlight network, has been damaged. Although treatment would be difficult with current medical methods, there might be a chance of recovery if STL technology is used. Therefore, to foster the synthesis of new networks, we attempt to grant new dynamism to Kirito-kun's Fluctlight through unrestricted STL."

Higa sighed, picked up the bottle of water on the console and took a sip. He was not used at all to this kind of long explanation.

"To proceed with this treatment, it would be necessary for him to dive into the Underworld. If his Fluctlight cannot move around as though it were in the real world, the treatment would have no results. Therefore, same as his Dive at the Roppongi branch: we concealed Kirito-kun's memories and let him land at the border of the Underworld… This is what we originally planned. But, even today the reason remains unknown… I'm afraid it is due to the damage to his Fluctlight; his memories had not been concealed at all. Kirito-kun has been placed into the Underworld under his current real-world condition of Kirigaya Kazuto. We just found out from his contact with his from inside…"

"Wait… wait a minute."

Koujiro Rinko interjected.

"Then, has he, in the time-accelerated Underworld, spent those days as Kirigaya-kun? How many months… inside…?"

"…About two years."

Hearing Higa's reply, Asuna's body that was being hugged by Rinko trembled slightly. Even though his words were likely to be extremely shocking to her, Higa continued, trusting in her earlier promise:

"In that time, Kirito-kun has contacted the artificial Fluctlights in that world. I'm afraid, he also knows that the Fluctlights will eventually, due to the end of this

current virtual experiment, all be destroyed… So, his target is installed in the center of the Underworld, and was once the contact console connecting the starting village with the real world. Kiku-san, he was planning to request you to protect all of the Fluctlights."

Higa glanced to the side; Kikuoka, whose glasses reflected the light of the monitor, was still gazing at the stereoscoping image. He turned back to Rinko and Asuna:

"…This is not something simple, since the contact device is buried in the stronghold of the ruling power, now called the «Axiom Church». Since the Fluctlights belonging to the Church possess absolute status value, Kirito-kun, who was set as a common person, had no way to fight them. Originally, shortly after he breaks into the Church, he would [Die], and log out of the Underworld… But he did it. Being attacked, we could not confirm detailed information from the logs, but we assume that he recruited some people, who of course are artificial Fluctlights… that is, the help of partners. In the fight against the Church, those partners nearly all died, and as a result, when he successfully opened a connection to here, he felt deep guilt. It can be said that he attacked his own Fluctlight. In that instant, those black-clothed people cut the power line, creating a short-circuit that instantly spiked the STL output. As a result, Kirito-kun's impulse of self-destruction has become reality… His [inner self] has lost activity…"

"Inner self… Lost activity? What do you mean?"

Hearing Rinko's question, Higa turned back to the console:

"…Please take a look at this."

He quickly typed on the keyboard and magnified the live feed of the activity of the Fluctlight labeled as Kirigaya Kazuto.

Near the center of the irregularly flashing spectrum-colored cloud, a small puff of darkness like a dark nebula was cradled.

"Compared with the artificial Fluctlights in the Light Cubes, we are still quite far from a full analysis of human organic Fluctlight structure. The general mapping,

however, has been completed. This black hole, what was originally in here, simply put, is the [Subject] …Self-Image."

"Subject …An image of the self determined by the self?"

"Yes. All human choice is determined by a Fluctlight Y/N path: [Whether or not I will proceed under these conditions.] By way of example, Rinko-senpai, have you ever ordered a second bowl in a gyudon restaurant?"

"… Of course not."

"Not even have the slightest thought of 'I still want to eat' or 'I can have one more'?"

"No."

"That is to say, these were the results of Rinko-senpai's Self-Image circuit processing. Similarly, virtually no decisions can be made and no movements can be undertaken if they do not pass through this circuit. In Kirito's situation, the majority of his Fluctlight is unharmed. But, because the vital circuit has lost its function, no matter if it is processing external input, or outputting voluntary actions, it cannot be done. What he is capable of now… I'm afraid, are reflexive actions ingrained within his memory. For example, eating, sleeping, and related tasks."

Rinko bit her lip, as though she were thinking about something. She eventually whispered:

"Then… then now, how is his state of mind?"

"… Regrettably…"

Higa hesitated, lowered his head, and continued:

"He does not know who he is, or what he wants to do; he cannot say or do anything… That would likely be his condition…"

Silence permeated the dark room for the third time.

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2

"... ***Fu***..."

The following part of the syllable was completely drowned out by the deafening noise of hardened boots kicking away a sheet of metal.

A member of the assault team, Vassago Casals, seemed unsatisfied with denting the wall two or three times, and forcefully crushed with his foot an empty candy box that a RATH technician had probably left tens of minutes ago, before finally stopping his stream of profanity.

As proof of the Spanish blood coursing through his veins, he ran a hand through his slightly wavy black hair, moved briskly to the console and seized the collar of the bulletproof jacket of his teammate with one hand.

"You sucker, try saying that again."

Vassago gripped an exaggeratedly skinny youth, who was as weakly thin as a whip. His golden hair was trimmed very short, and his skin was snowy white as though ill.

This man who wore a pair of rough metal-framed glasses was the only non-combatant in the team. A hacker by the name of Critter, informally employed by the Glowgen Defense Systems Cyber Operation Department [CYOP].

A self-proclaimed internet criminal with an arrest record, with an internet name instead of a real name. But Vassago was the same. Vassago was one of the 72 demons recorded in the «**Ars Goetia**» [2], also known as the Prince of Hell. There were no parents on Earth who would name their son that. He was also an employee of the CYOP and was not an expert on computers but in combat – of course under Full Dive. Although he was a man with a suspicious record lesser than that of Critter, his VR combat skills were quite outstanding.

[2] The *Ars Goetia* (Latin from Greek, literally "Art of Sorcery") is the first section of the *Lesser Key of Solomon* and contains descriptions of the 72 demons that King Solomon is said to have confined in a bronze vessel sealed with magic. *The Lesser Key of Solomon* is a "spell book" on demonology. More info here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lesser_Key_of_Solomon

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In reality —

The twelve members of the «Ocean Turtle» Assault Team, apart from their leader, Gabriel Miller, all had dark pasts, and adopted new identities in exchange for being fed as [Dogs].

As a dog in their midst, Critter expressed no fear whatsoever at being hoisted up by Vassago, replying as he loudly chewed his gum:

"I'll say it as many times as I want. Listen, this console's locked as hard as dried shit, and the laptops we brought in aren't gonna be able to calculate the unlock code until you bastards die of old age. Got it?"

"I ain't talking 'bout that, four-eyes! Weren't you saying that it locked because we moved too goddamn slowly!?"

Vassago shot back loudly. If he tried hard enough, with his wild flair, he was handsome enough to be a successful fashion model, but he was quite frightening when enraged.

"Hey, hey, just telling the truth, man?"

"You were trembling like a leaf during combat, but you sure are one cocky bastard now!"

The other teammates snickered at the two men firing expletives at each other, instead of stopping them. Capturing the right timing, Gabriel snapped his fingers at the two men to attract their attention.

"OK, cut it out, you two. There's no time to determine who's responsible. Now we need to think about our next step."

Then, Vassago suddenly changed to a child-like tone:

"But bro, if I don't teach him a lesson…"

He wanted to tell him not to say "bro", but swallowed his words. Vassago called Gabriel this probably because they had both acknowledged each other's prowess

during one-on-one VR training, but no matter how many time he heard this, it felt ill-conceived. To Gabriel, these kinds of ambiguous human relationships only based on emotions, such as *friends* or *partners*, were only convoluted synonyms.

Sooner or later, when the technology of extracting and saving souls was his, all human emotion would be able to be categorized under hue or shape through the «cloud of light». As he thought, Gabriel said to the two in an authoritarian tone:

"Listen to me, Vassago, Critter. I've been very satisfied with the actions of the team until today, as we have successfully achieved our first goal of taking over the control room."

Hearing this, Vassago very reluctantly released Critter's collar and put his hands on his hips.

"But, bro, there's no meaning in that 'cause this important console is locked. Our final objective, the Light Cube Cluster or whatever, is on the other side of this metal wall, right?"

"Look, we're just about to discuss a way to bring this wall down."

"But, the JSDF men ain't shrinking away forever, eh? If we keep going after them, this big stupid turtle's escort, the Aegis destroyer will send the pros to attack us, and we'll be in real trouble 'cause we have only eleven men fighting and one sitting as still as cargo."

As expected of a Vice Captain hand-picked by Gabriel, Vassago possessed control of the situation at hand that was not a trait of a simple wild dog. Thinking for a moment, Gabriel shrugged and said:

"… As it seems, our client has some kind of secret deal with the higher-ups of the JSDF. The Aegis destroyer won't do anything within 24 hours of the attack."

"…Whew…"

Critter whistled softly. Behind wind goggle-like glasses, his light gray eyes narrowed.

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“So, this operation is more than just a burgl… —No, no. it’s better left unsaid.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

Gabriel lightly smiled and nodded, surveying everyone again.

“Right, let’s confirm the situation. It’s 1447 hours, Japan Standard Time. From infiltration to now, 40 minutes have passed. We are currently in the Main Control Room of the «Ocean Turtle». Although we successfully secured the target facility, we have been unable to detain a «RATH» technician, and the control system here has been locked. The next objective should be securing the Auxiliary Control Room… Brigg, can you cut through the blast door?”

The hulking teammate who was called slowly stepped forward and replied:

“Doesn’t look good. Seems to be the newest synthetic material. Using the portable cutting saw I have, it’s completely impossible within 24 hours.”

“The Japanese economy is alive and well. Hans, can you breach the wall with C4?”

This time, a tall, slim teammate with a very handsome mustache waved his arms freely.

“I say we forget it. On the other side of that wall is the Light Cube Cluster storage, so I can’t guarantee no harm to the goods before blasting this door.”

“Hmm.”

Gabriel crossed his arms and thought for a split-second, then continued:

“… Our mission, is to find a particular one from an immense number of Light Cubes and take it along with its interface. We already have the ID information of the Cube. In other words, if we can operate this console, we can effortlessly find the Cube and extract it from the Cluster, and we would’ve been having beers on the return trip at this moment.”

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“Goddamn it, it’s all because of that turtle four-eyes, always boasting [My crime is infiltrating the central server of the Pentagon] or whatever, but can’t open a tiny lock.”

“Ooh, didn’t see that coming. I’m actually being told off by a gamer who’s only fired a gun made of polygons.”

Staring at Vassago and Critter who were itching to fight, Gabriel intensified his tone.

“Do you all want to go back empty-handed and be ridiculed instead of rewarded?”

“***NO!!***”

Everyone shouted together.

“Are you all merely laymen who can’t even best an amateur technician?”

“***NO!!***”

“Then THINK!! Prove that the round objects on top of your necks aren’t filled with oatmeal!”

Semi-automatically putting on the [Tough Commander] persona, Gabriel thought by himself in silence.

As the one who seeks souls, Gabriel’s biggest goal was to obtain the first true artificial intelligence «Alice» mankind had ever created and take Soul Translation technology for himself. After he obtained those, he planned to use the nerve agent he had secretly brought in to take care of everyone else, and then escape to Australia.

But, having only reached the current stage, the attack that the NSA had consigned him somewhat counted towards Gabriel’s goal. Now, since system commands through administrator privileges were blocked, they must figure out another way to take «Alice»’s Light Cube.

Alice… «A.L.I.C.E.».

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The one who told Gabriel's client, the NSA, this codename, was a «RATH» insider informant, [Rabbit].

Gabriel did not yet know [Rabbit]'s personal profile. But, given that the motivation to an organization and disclose its information could only be a handsome reward, he likely would not reveal himself in this dangerous situation and take action.

In other words, they could not expect assistance from Rabbit, on the other side of the blast door. They must utilize the information and equipment they have now, and achieve their goal within a short time.

Time — All was time.

Gabriel, who had absolute control over useless emotions such as nervousness and anxiety, could not help but feel a certain pressure when faced with a slowly approaching time limit of 23 hours.

When the NSA agents had entrusted him with this top secret seizure mission, they had said to Gabriel:

The activities of «RATH» have been severely wavering our vested interest and rights in the Japanese military industry. Therefore, the higher-ups of the Japan Self Defense Force are displeased with the existence of «RATH» — Furthermore, many of them were eager to obstruct the project.

«RATH» was mainly comprised of young Self-Defense cadres who did not hold much power in politics. The NSA was very sure of this, and signed a secret treaty with the CIA at the embassy and some high official of the JSDF navy. The Aegis destroyer *Nagato* that protected the «RATH» headquarters, «Ocean Turtle», will take no course of action within 24 hours since the attack, under grounds that [the safety of the hostages comes first].

But, after the period of standby, when considering the upcoming media coverage, the Aegis destroyer would eventually have to act. As soon as heavily armed forces came, outnumbered, outgunned, Gabriel's strike force team would likely be annihilated.

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If the situation really developed into the worst-case scenario, he could still escape back to the submarine, alone. But at the same time, without retrieving the important Light Cube, his great journey to seek the soul would retreat to an irreparable state.

Gabriel had already meticulously planned out his long life after this attack.

First he would take Alice and escape to Australia, concealing the Light Cube and STL technology in a villa in the Sovereign Islands in the Gold Coast. Then he would take a plane back to San Diego and report the failure of the attack to the NSA. After it had all blown over, he would return to Australia, construct an STL machine in the vast basement of his villa, and architect his dream virtual world.

The inhabitants of this world would only include «Alice» and Gabriel at first. But that would be much too lonely. As the goal was to study souls, he must increase his resources.

He would search for young and energetic soul carriers in Sydney or Cairns, kidnap them, use the STL to extract their soul and dispose of the unwanted shell. There would be a day when he would cross the seas and trek back to his home country — and travel to the country where Full Dive originated, Japan.

The unique mentality of Japanese VR gamers once deeply charmed Gabriel. Of course, not everyone was like this, but one group of gamers seemed to live there, in the VR game, as though it were more realistic than real life, carelessly casting around their real-life emotions. Whenever he thought of the sniper girl he had met in Gun Gale Online, he would feel a twinge that arose from a strong desire.

The reason was likely connected to the [Real Virtual World] that had existed for only two years in that country. With their machines being hacked by the developers, these young people experienced a death game with real aspects of life and death. The souls of these [Survivors] possessed an adaptability to virtual worlds unlike anyone else.

If possible, even if it were just one, he hoped to obtain them — especially the souls of the elite players who were termed [Progressors]. Although he didn't know if that sniper girl was one of them or not, he of course also wished to obtain her soul. The

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Light Cubes sealed with those souls would exude a shine far more precious than any gem.

An ultimate light that the tycoons of the world would be unable to buy with tens of millions of dollars. He would line them into his secret room, selecting whoever he wanted everyday and loading them into his favorite world, playing with them however he wanted.

What was more beautiful was that the souls extracted from humans and sealed into Light Cubes could be freely copied and stored. Broken ones, twisted ones, all could be easily rewound and ultimately sculpted into Gabriel's favorite posture. It was like cutting and polishing a raw crystal to make it shine with a supreme glow.

When he reached that stage, Gabriel's long journey would return to the beginning, as if he had been travelling in an enormous circle.

Back to the moment when he was young, under the huge trees of the forest, seeing the beautiful glow of Alicia Clingerman's soul.

These thoughts flashing in his mind, Gabriel closed his eyes, a slight shiver running down his back.

When he opened his eyes again, he recovered his ice cold mentality.

If he analogized the souls of youths from different countries as ruby, sapphire and emerald encircling a king's crown, then the great diamond encased in the center could only be «Alice». Only Alice, with the untouched, unblemished, ultimate soul, would qualify as his own eternal partner. Therefore, he had to think of a way to find and obtain her Light Cube, no matter what.

But without destroying the blast door to the Light Cube Cluster storage, he could not seize it through physical means.

Then, he could only control it from the system. That said, even the first-rate digital criminal Critter was helpless against the lock on the console.

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Clacking his boots, Gabriel moved behind Critter, who was moving his two hands at top speed over the keyboard.

"How is it?"

Two hands punched the air in response.

"The administrator login is really despairing. What we can do is jealously chew our nails and peek at the fairy-tale kingdom that the Fluctlights up in the Cluster are happily living in."

Critter moved his finger; a window opened on the big screen on the wall directly in front of them and displayed a wondrous scene.

It was quite unlike a [fairy-tale kingdom]. The sky was soaked in a frightening crimson and the ground was as pitch-black as asphalt.

In the middle of the picture stood several primitive tents made of what appeared to be animal skin. On the side gathered ten or so chubby, bald, strange creatures, causing some unknown commotion.

There were generally humanoid but no matter how you looked at them, were not human. Their backs were bent, their hands were nearly long enough to scrape the ground, while their crooked feet were very short.

"Goblins...?"

Gabriel muttered. Critter whistled softly, saying with apparent happiness:

"Oh, you're pretty knowledgeable, Captain. That's right, they don't look like orcs or ogres, so they should be goblins."

"But, as goblins they're way too fucking large. These are hobgobs, hobgoblins."

Vassago stepped besides them with his hands on his hips and added his own comment. Although he was just an expert in VR combat, he seemed to know much about fantasy RPGs.

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At the place where Gabriel was looking, the fuss of the ten [Hobgoblins] escalated. Two of them seized each other's chests, twisting together in a scrambling fight, while the surrounding goblins cheered with hands raised.

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"…Critter–"

Gabriel felt a certain faint intuition, and spoke to the monk-headed man in the seat.

"Huh?"

"These guys… These monsters, are they a part of the system?"

"Hmm, doesn't look like it. From a certain viewpoint, these guys are real [humans]. They're artificial souls read from the Light Cubes up there… Fluctlights."

"For real?! What the hell!"

Vassago jumped and yelled furiously.

"These hobgobs are humans!? They have the same souls as us!? My granny in Frisco's[3] gonna die if she heard that!!"

Drumming with a pitter-patter on the monk-head, he shouted:

"Aw, these guys are actually doing this kind of God-forsaken research. Right, are those shiny things full of these goblins, orcs or whatever? Is our Alice-chan one of them as well?"

"No way~"

Annoyed, Critter pushed Vassago's hands away and corrected:

"Listen, the world called Underworld that the «RATH» guys created is divided into two areas. Located in the center, slightly west, is the «***Human Empire***» where normal humans live. Then, outside is the «***Dark Territory***», where monsters like these are all over the place. Alice will of course be somewhere in the ***Human Empire***. It's so freakin' big that it'd be impossible to find her if we keep peeping like this."

"Well that's easy. Since they're humans, we can talk, eh? Can't we just dive into the ***Human Empire*** and ask the people there if they know an Alice?"

[3] Frisco is a city in Texas, USA. It is regarded as one of the best places to live.

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"Wow, a pig. There's a pig here."

"The fuck did you say?!!"

"I'm telling you, the people who made the Underworld are Japanese. Of course, the [guys who live in there] would speak Japanese. Can YOU speak Japanese?"

Hearing Critter's words mixed with derisive laughter, Vassago revealed a twisted grin.

"**Don't take me lightly.**"

Now, not just Critter, the entire team widened their eyes. Vassago had spoken Japanese so fluently that even Gabriel was shocked.

The young Hispanic man changed back to English and continued:

"No problems with communications, eh? Got anything else to say, four-eyes?"

"Y-Yeah. Of course."

Critter recovered from surprise and snorted.

"There are tens of thousands of people living in the ***Human Empire***. Are YOU going to ask each and… every one of them…"

Critter paused his retort as though he had inspired himself through his own speech and suddenly stood up. Although his monk-head bumped into Vassago's chin, who wanted to spit out expletives, the hacker shouted unhesitantly:

"Wait. WaitwaitwaitWAIT. It doesn't have to be one man…"

Hearing this, the faint inspiration in Gabriel's heart finally burst completely into being.

"… Yeah. Accounts set up to log into the Underworld… They can hardly all be Level 1 normal citizens, can they. Right, Critter?"

"***Yes. Yes, boss!!***"

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Critter tapped the keyboard hard as if it were a percussion instrument; the big screen instantly rolled up lists of names.

"If «RATH» operators wanted to log in to observe or perform internal actions, there should be identities of all classes in their accounts. Military officers… No, generals… No, no, noblemen, royalty… Could even be the King himself…"

"Wow, that's cool, isn't it?!"

Vassago shouted, massaging his chin that was about to split in half.

"In other words, we can use a general's, president's, or whatever high-class profile to log into the Underworld, and can make whatever commands we want! 'Army parade! Right, face! Find Alice!!' or something like that."

"… Why is it that when you talk about it, something so brilliant would instantly become so stupid."

Continuing his muttering, Critter scrolled the list with frightening speed.

However.

Seconds later, along with a rare instance of profanity from him, the list was halted.

"Shit, no good. Not just direct commands from here, even using high-level accounts to log in are protected with heavy passwords. Unfortunately, it looks like we can only dive into the ***Human Empire*** as normal citizens."

"…Hmph…"

Clear disappointment floated onto Critter and Vassago's faces, but Gabriel remained expressionless and tilted his head slightly.

There was not much time to hesitate.

But, that was but a limit of the time in reality. Beyond the screen, in the abnormal Underworld, time was compressed in an astonishing ratio of hundreds of times.

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In other words, the remaining 23 hours equated to over a year in the Underworld. With this much time, even if they logged in as normal citizens, after finding and capturing [Alice], it wasn't impossible to use the internal information console to extract her into the real world.

But that was definitely a long task. Compared to such a time-wasting task, it would be faster to approach from outside the ***Human Empire***.

"Critter. Are there any advanced accounts outside the ***Empire***... prepared for the «***Dark Territory***»?"

"...Outside? But aren't the chances of Alice being there infinitely close to zero?"

Although he questioned, Critter's fingers flashed quickly.

Gabriel looked at the newly opened cluster of windows, replying:

"Mm, yes. But, the border is not absolutely impenetrable, is it? With the parameters given by the account, we might be able to cross the border."

"Oh, as expected from my bro! Your thoughts are unique as always! It's that... using a non-human general, or a monster general to fight your way through, right?! That's burning hot!!"

To the whistling and shouting Vassago, Critter shot at him with utmost hatred:

"If you want to burn, then burn, if you're the one who logs in: you'll be a goblin or orc in that world. Eh, you fit the bill anyway... Hm? Ah, this is it, this is it!"

With the click of the keyboard, two more windows popped open.

"Uhh, different from the Empire, there are only two super-accounts...Yes! There are no passwords! Let's see... One of them is the «Dark Knight» profile. Priority level is... 70! We can use this one!"

"Ooh, that's great! I'll have that one!!"

Ignoring the noisy Vassago, Critter activated the other window.

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"Then, the other one is… What's this? The profile's blank, and there's no level whatsoever. There's only a name. This… How do you say this? … [***Emperor***… Vector]?"

"Oh, an ***Emperor***. Then I'll take tha…"

Gabriel patted Vassago's shoulder from behind, as he was just about to continue.

"No, I'll use this account."

"Eh? But bro, can you speak Japanese?"

"**Not as fluently as you can, though.**"

Gabriel replied with three years of Japanese study. Although he had given up on reading and writing from the beginning, he was confident about conversational usage.

"Hah, you're pretty good. Then my bro shall be the Emperor, and I'll be the Dark Knight. Now we're talking! Four-eyes, when can we log in!?"

Completely ignoring the noisy Vassago, Critter continued punching the keyboard. Seeing his focused scanning of information on the screen, Gabriel walked besides him and asked calmly:

"What is it, Critter, is there another problem?"

"… Should I call it a problem, or a slight concern… There's a strange phrase all over the data, though I can't really understand it…"

"Oh? What phrase?"

Critter took a deep breath and answered Gabriel's question:

"«[***Final Load Test***]»."

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3

Higa considered carefully breaking the heavy silence that engulfed the Auxiliary Control Room.

“Uhh… Well, his physical body… or should I say, the condition of the Kirigaya Kazuto in the real world, is similar to what I just described… not optimistic.”

Seeing Asuna, whose shoulders were gripped by Rinko, tremble her thin body in surprise, Higa added in a panic:

“B-but, there’s still some hope!”

“…What do you mean by that?”

Rinko asked with a sharp, yet seemingly praying voice.

“The Kirito-kun in the Underworld is still logged in.”

Higa looked at the screen that was much smaller than the one in the Main Control Room. He moved the cursor, clicked a few times, and the picture changed: a bird’s eye view of the Underworld, with the round Human Empire surrounded by the Dark Territory, appeared.

“That is to say, although his Self-Image has been damaged, his Fluctlight is dynamic, and undergoing stimulation. If so, even though we are completely out of options in the real world, we can probably heal his soul within the Underworld. Because he overly blames himself, he damaged his soul. If there was someone who could grant him [forgiveness]… it’s hard to say…”

Higa knew that his words were unrealistic.

But those were his unadulterated true thoughts.

Succeeding the NerveGear was the evolution of the Medicuboid Brain-Computer Interface, the Soul Translator. Although Higa had discovered the human quantum consciousness «Fluctlight» through his development of that machine, there were still a great many things yet to be understood.

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Was a Fluctlight a physical phenomenon?

Or, was it a conceptual existence unexplainable by modern science?

If it was the latter, Kirigaya's Kazuto's injured, exhausted soul would probably only be able to be healed by some supernatural power.

For example — someone's love.

"...I will go."

As if Higa's mind had been read.

A frail yet determined voice resounded in the Auxiliary Control Room.

The people in the room gasped and stared agape at the owner of the voice. Yuuki Asuna nodded at Koujiro Rinko, who was supporting her shoulders, and took a step forward, continuing:

"I, am entering the Underworld. I will find Kirito-kun there and say to him: You've done your part; many sad and terrible things may have happened... but you've tried your best."

Higa, who had dedicated his entire life to researching this type of psychological awakening, was dumbstruck by Asuna, her great chestnut eyes flashing with tears.

Kikuoka, with an expression as though he had been struck by something in his chest, immediately concealed his expression with the lens of his glasses and looked to the STL Room on the side.

"... Indeed, there is still one empty STL."

After saying this, the commander made a complicated expression, continuing:

"But, the current state of the Underworld is in no way stable. According to the predetermined plan, by our time, there are only a few hours left until it enters the Final Load Test."

"Final... Load? What will happen?"

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Higa explained, gesturing with his hands, to Rinko, who wrinkled her brow:

"This… Put simply, the shell is gonna break. The endurance value of «Gate of the East» that has divided the Human Empire and the ***Dark Territory*** for hundreds of years will decrease to zero, and an army of monsters will pour into the Human World right away. If the humans have a complete defensive mechanism, they should be able to repel them. But, in the experiment this time, Kirito-kun has destroyed a large portion of the ruling power, the «Axiom Church», so… We really don't know what's going to happen…"

"If you think carefully about it, for the situation now, one of us needs to dive in no matter what."

Kikuoka muttered with his arms crossed.

"As soon as the invasion begins, in the chaos, the «Alice» in the human world is very likely to be killed. If it comes to that, the time we gained when we painstakingly locked down the console will all be for naught… If we can let someone enter with an advanced account, protect Alice, and bring her to the «World End Altar», we can extract her from there to this auxiliary console."

"Right… Before this happened, you told Kirito-kun that already, didn't you?"

Hearing Rinko's words, Kikuoka helplessly nodded.

"Mm. If he's fine, he will definitely do it. At that time, he happened to be with Alice, so… "

"So, in the months that have passed according to internal time, the chance of the two of them being together is very high… Is that what you were trying to say?"

This time it was Higa who replied:

"…You… could say that. If so, perhaps it would be better if we had Asuna-san dive in… Aside from her communication with Kirito-kun, we need the combat ability to protect Alice. Among us, the one most familiar with activity in virtual worlds would be Asuna-san, definitely."

Chapter 16 - Attack on the Ocean Turtle

"Then, it would be best to use the highest level possible for the advanced account."

Nodding to Kikuoka's words, Higa moved his fingers across the keyboard at breakneck speed.

"Hey, just pick whatever you like. Knight, general, nobility… There are all kinds of advanced accounts."

"Hey, wait."

Rinko interjected, slightly nervously.

"What?"

"…The attackers, could they be thinking the same thing? Didn't you just say it? The hidden way to secure Alice is to operate from the inside."

"Ah… Indeed. This could very well become their method. In the Main Control Room below, there are two STLs. But they won't have time to crack the login passwords for the advanced accounts. They can only login as LV1 normal citizens. They just don't have the Priority to do anything in the terrible situation during the Final Load Test."

While he was quickly explaining—

Higa suddenly felt a sliver of anxiety, as though he had forgotten something important.

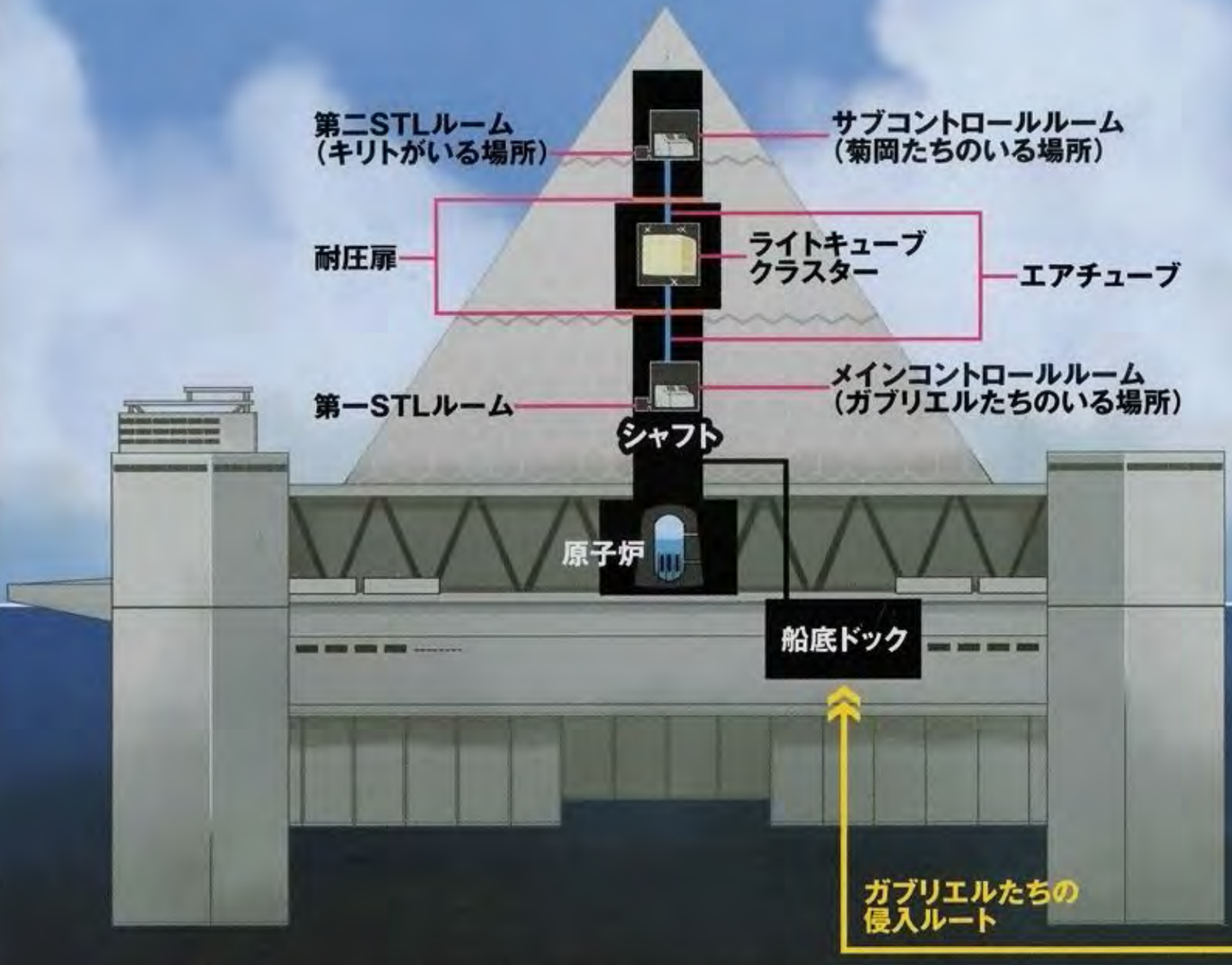
But this concern was dispersed by the quickly scrolling list of accounts.

Sword Art Online

The 4th Episode
Project "Alicization"
the new chapter
War of the Underworld

ソードアート・オンライン
第四部
［アリシゼーション］新章
アンダーワールド大戦

≪オーシャンタートル≫内部



ボトムアップ人工知能開発計画≪プロジェクト・アリシゼーション≫のための偽装企業≪ラース≫の本拠地である自走式メガフロート≪オーシャンタートル≫。
巨大なピラミッド型をしたそこには、≪アンダーワールド≫にログインするための≪ソウル・トランスレーター≫が、第一STL室に二台、第二STL室に二台の計四台存在する。キリトが≪アンダーワールド≫にログインしている≪ソウル・トランスレーター≫は、第二STLルームに設置されている。

≪オーシャンタートル≫の中心には≪アンダーワールド≫の住人たちの≪魂≫である人工フラクトライトが保存された≪ライトキューブクラスター≫がある。
この膨大なライトキューブ群の中から、アリスの人工フラクトライトをエアチューブを通じてイジェクトするというのが、ガブリエル達の任務である。

イラスト／来栖達也

Within the «Ocean Turtle» [i]

The base for the disguised company «RATH» constructed to undergo «Project Alicization», development of a Bottom-Up artificial intelligence, is the independent large-scale floating carrier «Ocean Turtle».

Within the enormous pyramid-shaped «Ocean Turtle», STL Room One and STL Room Two each contain two «Soul Translators» needed to log into the «Underworld». The «Soul Translator» used by Kirito to log into the «Underworld» is within STL Room Two.

At the center of the «Ocean Turtle» there are stored the «souls» of the inhabitants of the «Underworld», which is the «Light Cube Cluster» of the artificial Fluctlights.

Gabriel's group's mission is to eject Alice's artificial Fluctlight from this gigantic mass of Light Cubes through a vacuum tube.

[i] https://defan752.wordpress.com/

Chapter 17 – Dark Territory

Chapter 17

Dark Territory
The Eleventh Month of the Human World Calendar, 380

1

Before the dragon came to a stop, Dark Knight Lipia Zankehl jumped down from its back and ran with full strength across the takeoff pad into the footbridge that connected to the Imperial Palace.

Quickly feeling difficulty breathing, she used her right hand to remove the helmet that covered her face.

Gray-blue long hair billowed out with a flourish. Adjusting it with her left hand and tossing it behind her back, Lipia further quickened her pace. She really wanted to take off her stuffy cloak and armor, but did not want the consuls crawling about the Imperial Palace to see one inch of her skin.

After she sprinted through the winding corridor, between the round columns on her right, a colossal black city erected under the backdrop of the red sky appeared in sight.

Imperial Palace Obsidia was the tallest structure of all in the boundless Land of Darkness — Of course, this did not include the tabooed «Mountain Range at the End» — carved out of the rocky mountains and constructed over a hundred years.

From the throne on the highest floor, it was said to be just possible to glimpse the Mountain Range at the End standing far away in the east, and the great gate embedded in the mountain.

But, there has been no one to confirm the veracity of this rumor for hundreds of years.

After the First Emperor, also the God of Darkness Vector, returned to the underground darkness in ancient times, the Throne of the Land of Darkness had always been empty. The great gate on the highest floor was sealed by a lock with infinite Life, left eternally unopened.

Chapter 17 – Dark Territory

Lipia turned her eyes away from the peak of the pitch-black castle and called to the ogre guards at the castle gate straight ahead:

"In the name of the Eleventh Dark Knight Zankehl! Open the gate!!"

The wolf-headed guards were quite well-built, but turned their heads very slowly; by the time they turned the lever of the opening mechanism, Lipia had arrived at the cast iron gate.

The door made deep "**gu, gung**" sounds as it opened a sliver; Zankehl slipped sideways through the gap.

She had not seen the castle for three months, yet what welcomed Lipia was the same cold air.

The [Kobolds] doggedly scrubbed the corridors every day, making them spotless. As she ran, her armor clanking on the obsidian slabs, two flirtatiously dressed women showing skin here and there glided over soundlessly.

On top of their shiny, wavy hair, they wore large, pointy hats announcing their statuses as Dark Sorceresses. Lipia intended to ignore them and brush past, but one of the women sharply raised her voice in an exaggerated manner:

"Uwa, how noisy! Is an orc or something running?!"

Then, the other responded with a slight laugh:

"It caaan't beee, these tremors have to be those of a Giant!"

— If combat were not prohibited within the city, she would have sliced off their tongues long ago.

Lipia thought. She snorted and raced on.

The Human females born in the Land of Darkness usually entered the Dark Sorcery Guild after graduating from Training Schools. The Guild was an organization of extreme indulgence, teaching debauchery instead of rules. As a result, it produced people interested only in decorating themselves, just like the two who walked by.

Chapter 17 – Dark Territory

Even so, they held great antagonism towards women who chose to become Knights. When she was a youngster in the Training Schools, Lipia had been cursed with poisonous insects by a Sorceress who did not get along with her. Things settled down after she drew her sword and sliced off the Sorceress's proudly tied hair.

In any case, there were only idiots with no ambition in this country.

Often competing, no matter if it were organizations or individuals, basing every decision on the degree of power, the Land of Darkness had no future.

Although danger could be balanced due to the «Ten Feudal Lords Meetings», it was unable to hold for much longer. If, in the imminent battle with the Human World — termed the «Ium Country» by Orcs and Goblins, a few of the Ten Feudal Lords were to die, the balance would be broken, and everything would become a chaos of bloodlust once more.

The one who told of this future to Lipia, was one of the Ten Feudal Lords, the Commander of the Dark Knights whom she directly reported to, and also her loved one.

And now, Lipia had confidential intelligence that he was anticipating.

Therefore, she would not waste a second to curb the Sorceress' taunts.

Cutting straight through the empty lobby and flying up the wide staircase two steps at a time. Even with plenty of exercise, she was panting and drenched in sweat once she arrived on the right floor.

With the Land of Darkness divided by negotiation between them, among the Ten Feudal Lords, five were Humans, two were Goblins, and the rest were vanguards of the Orcs, Ogres, and Giants. After nearly a hundred years of civil war, they finally agreed on a document similar to a treaty, and ended up with regulations keeping the Five Races in equal standing.

Because of this, on the 18th floor, near the top floor of Obsidia, there were private rooms for each of the Ten Feudal Lords. Lipia dampened her footsteps in the round corridor, and gently knocked three times with her right hand on the door of the innermost room.

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"Come in."

A deep voice replied immediately.

Lipia glanced left and right in the corridor; after confirming that there was no one, she quickly opened the door and slipped inside.

The decorations within the room were as low profile as possible. Breathing in the manly smell floating in the air, Lipia genuflected and bowed her head.

"Knight Lipia Zankehl; I have returned."

"Good work. Come, sit."

Suppressing her excitement, Lipia raised her head and looked towards the owner of the strong voice.

On the other side of the round table, there was a man sitting in a long armchair with his feet propped high: the Dark Knight Commander — Biksul Ul Shasta, also known as the «Dark General».

As a Human, he possessed an outstanding figure. Although his shoulders were not as broad as those of an Ogre, he did not seem to lose in terms of height. His head of jet-black hair was trimmed very short, and his moustache was very neat.

His bulging muscles nearly popped the buttons off of his plain linen shirt, yet there was not a hint of fat on his waist. Although he maintained a perfect body that looked not a day older than 40, since he had ascended to the topmost throne of the Knights, not many people knew that he continued to undergo a harsh exercise routine every day.

Seeing her lover for the first time in three months, Lipia had to resist the urge to fly into his embrace, instead sitting in the sofa opposite Shasta.

Shasta raised his upper body and handed one of the crystal glasses on the table to Lipia, then broke the seal on what appeared to be aged wine.

"I really wanted to have a glass with you, so I swiped a bottle from the Treasury yesterday."

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Winking, he poured the fragrant, crimson liquid into his glass. His expression was that of a mischievous child, completely the same as his former self.

"Th…Thank you, Your Excellency."

"How many times have I told you not to call me that when we're alone?"

"But… I'm still on a mission."

Shasta shrugged helplessly and they clinked glasses politely. Lipia sipped the expensive wine and felt the Life she had expended on her long journey slowly recovering.

"…Okay, so."

After downing a glass himself, he poured himself another one and changed to a serious expression, asking in a low voice:

"The [Matter of Importance] that you sent a familiar for: what is it?"

"It's…"

Lipia looked to her left and right, then leaned forward. Although Shasta was often candid, he was quite vigilant. This room had many heavy protection spells cast upon it; even the Witch, leader of the Sorcery Guild, would be unable to listen in. Even though she knew this, the intel she had brought was so important that she couldn't resist lowering her voice.

Staring straight into Shasta's black pupils, Lipia said simply:

"The Highest Minister of the Axiom Church of the Human World… is dead."

In an instant, even the Dark General widened his eyes in shock.

A long, deep sigh broke the silence.

"Is this… real…? I know it's discourteous to ask like this, and I'm not suspicious of your intel… but… that undead…"

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"Yes… I completely understand your feelings. I was unable to believe it myself, but after a week of confirmation, there is no error. I made sure by planting «Earworms» in the Central Cathedral."

"What? That was very reckless. If you were traced, you would've been unable to leave the capital, and dismembered by now."

"Yes. But, since a spell of this caliber has not been detected, it proves that this intel is accurate."

"…Mm…"

Filling his second glass of wine, Shasta's strong-willed face lowered slightly.

"—When, did that happen? Also, what was the cause of death?"

"About half a year ago…"

"Half a year. Indeed, their guard on the Mountain Range had probably been slightly loose at that time."

"Yes. About the cause of death of the Highest Minister… This is quite unbelievable, but they are said to be [slaughtered by a sword]…"

"By a sword. —You mean that someone cut that undead?"

"Impossible."

Lipia shook her head at the slack-jawed Shasta.

"I'm afraid, even if it's the undead, they have finally depleted their Life. But it was probably to save the spirit of the Highest Minister known as a God, to say some empty words like that…"

"Mm… My guess as well. But… Dead, the Highest Minister Administrator…"

Shasta closed his eyes, crossed his arms, and leaned back into the armchair.

After thinking deeply for a while like this, he opened his eyes with a short mutter.

"Opportunity."

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Lipia instantly held her breath and replied in a small voice:

“What opportunity?”

She immediately got an answer.

“Obviously… One of peace.”

As a word too dangerous to utter in this city, it quickly melted in the air of the room and dissipated.

“Do you consider it… possible, Your Excellency?”

Facing the softly questioning Lipia, Shasta fixed his gaze on the red liquid within his glass, and slowly, but deeply, nodded.

“No matter if it’s possible or not, we must achieve it regardless.”

Downing the wine with a gulp, he continued:

“The Life of the «Great Gate» that has divided the Human World and the Land of Darkness since the world was created is about to be depleted. A large-scale invasion of the sun and land-nourished Human World awaited by the Army of Five Dark Races, you can say is the arrow poised on the bow. In the last Ten Feudal Lords Meeting, there was a large quarrel just about dividing the land, riches, and slaves of the Human World. They are really… an incurable bunch of gluttons.”

At Shasta’s direct and unrestricted speech, Lipia recoiled slightly.

Different from the Human World that had the «Taboo Index», a thick book of law, to rule the nation, there was only one law in the Land of Darkness. That was — seize by force.

In a certain sense, compared with the other nine Feudal Lords whose thirst for power could not be quenched even if they obtained the highest authority, it could be said that Shasta’s consideration of peace with the Human World was heresy.

However, Lipia was deeply fascinated with this man because of his unique thoughts. Besides, unlike the servant women attending to their master, Lipia was not taken by

force. Shasta had presented a bouquet on bended knee and convinced Lipia with his truthful words.

Oblivious of his lover wandering in such thoughts, Shasta continued with added gravity:

"… But, they underestimate the Humans too much. Especially, the «Integrity Knights» that have protected the Human World for three hundred years."

Hearing this name, Lipia nodded, her head growing cold.

"Sure… They are skillful to a frightening extent."

"They have, quite literally, the strength of a thousand in one. In the long history of the Dark Knights, countless have been slain by the Integrity Knights, but it has never happened the other way around. Their swordsmanship is so excellent, and the Divine Instruments that they carry are powerful beyond measure… Even I have only brought one to an impasse a few times, but I couldn't manage to kill them. Of course, my defeats definitely number many."

"That is… due to their usage of mystifying techniques, such as releasing fire or blinding beams from their swords…"

"«Armament Full Control Art». Even though we've had our Technique Research Department study it for a long time, we're still unable to break it down. Just to go up against that skill, even a hundred Goblin Soldiers wouldn't be enough."

"Even though you say that… Our army numbers 50,000 while the Integrity Knights number only about thirty. Can we not suppress them with sheer volume…?"

At Lipia's words, Shasta scratched his moustache with a sarcastic air.

"Didn't I just say that they have the strength of a thousand in one? If you calculate it, we will lose 30,000 from our army."

"Why would… It can't be *that* many."

"Hm, yeah. Even though this method of calculation is disheartening, we'll be pushing forward in the battle with our Knights, Ogres, and Giants, the Dark Sorcerers would

be using long-range explosive attacks at the rear, and we'd eventually exhaust the Integrity Knights. But after their last Knight falls, it's hard to imagine how much we would have lost. Perhaps not 30,000, but losing half is certainly possible."

The crystal glass was set onto the table with a hard sound.

Shasta extended a hand to stop Lipia, who was about to refill his glass, and sunk his back into his armchair.

"...And the result, would of course be an imbalance in power between the Five Races of Darkness. The Ten Feudal Lords Meeting would become meaningless, and the treaty of equality between the Five Races would leave only its name. If it goes down like that, the «Age of Iron and Blood» that ended a hundred years ago would return. No, it would be worse. Because this time, the everlasting honeyed sea of the Humans would be in front of us. Deciding how to divide that piece of land would take more than a hundred years of war..."

This was the worst future scenario that Shasta often feared and mentioned repeatedly to Lipia. What was worse, the nine other Feudal Lords apart from Shasta did not think that this was the worst future at all — on the contrary, they were looking forward to it.

Lipia lowered her head, gazing at the gleaming light exuded by her pitch-black full body armor, which had been her partner ever since her entrance into Knighthood.

Twice as short as other kids when she was young, Lipia could never become a Knight if she had been born in the «Age of Iron and Blood»; she would have been sold to human traffickers, or abandoned outside the city, ending her short life there.

Although it was shady, she was still thankful for that peace treaty, as she had not been sold into slavery but instead entered the Youth School, benefited from a late-blooming talent in swordsmanship, and ascended to a nearly unattainably high position for a Human female.

Ever since she had become a Knight, Lipia had been gathering children who were abandoned by their parents from remote places rife with human trafficking, and took

care of them until they were able to enter school. She used nearly all of her income to run a childcare center like this.

She kept this a secret not only from her colleagues, but even from Shasta. She was unable to explain it herself; why would she do such a thing.

It was just that—

Lipia could not help feeling odd about this country, in which power dominates all. Although she had not the wisdom of Shasta, to be able to turn her thoughts into clear words, she felt that there should be a better, more appropriate form of this country — no, the entire Underworld, including the Human World.

Lipia hazily understood that this so-called new world, is far beyond the peace that Shasta proposed. At the same time, as a woman she was desperate to help the man she loved in order to realize his dream.

But.

"...But, how do you plan to convince the other Feudal Lords, Your Excellency? Not to mention... Would the Integrity Knights *accept* a negotiation for peace?"

Lipia inquired in a small voice.

"...Hm..."

Shasta closed his eyes, his right hand playing with his elaborate moustache. Eventually, he murmured bitterly:

"About the Integrity Knights, there is still a turn for the better. As the Highest Minister is now dead, the main commander should now be that old man Bercouli. Although he's a sly old fox, he's still a reasonable man. The problem... still lies with the Ten Feudal Lords Meeting. On this side... although it may seem to conflict with our goal..."

Deep within his raised eyelids, two sharply gleaming eyes stared at the ceiling.

"— Seems like we have to slash a few. At least four."

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Lipia gasped in shock and leaned forward:

"Four, you say, Your Excellency…? If my assumption is right, it can only be the two Goblin chiefs, the Orc chief, and…"

"The Leader of the Dark Sorcery Guild. That woman has always been filled with wild desire for Administrator's secret to immortality, and the day that she ascends to the Emperor's Throne. She would definitely not accept the proposition of peace."

"B-but!"

Lipia objected in a strained voice.

"That's too reckless, Your Excellency! Even though the Goblin and Orc elders may not stand against your sword… We do not know what kind of despicable trick the Dark Sorceress would use!"

Even after Lipia finished, Shasta was silent.

But what he said completely took her by surprise.

"Hey, Lipia. How long have you been coming here to me?"

"Hah? It's… A-about… Ever since I turned 21… Four years."

"It's been that long, huh. … I apologize for always keeping you in a shadow of doubt. How about… It's time, uh, well…."

Rotating his eyes and scratching his head with a rustle, the Dark Knight Commander opened his mouth roughly:

"…Would you, officially, marry me? If you don't mind me as a middle-aged man."

"E…Excellency…"

Lipia opened her eyes, unable to speak.

She felt a heat slowly seeping out from deep within her heart, and just as she was about to unhesitantly fly into her lover's embrace…

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From the other side of the thick great door, a clear, loud voice as sharp as a whip pierced right through the wide room.

“Big news!! This is some BIG news!! AAHH, what on earth is happening!! Feudal Lords, come with me, quickly, QUICKLY!!”

She faintly remembered this voice: it belonged to one of the Feudal Lords, the head of the Commerce and Industry Guild.

Uncharacteristic of the huge, burly figure in Lipia’s memory, the scream continued completely unexpectedly:

“It’s THE MOST important event EVER!! — In-inside the Throne Room! The sealing lock! It’s SHAKIIIING!!”

2

Under the identity of Emperor Vector, Gabriel Miller, dominating the Throne Room, surveyed the artificial Fluctlights prostrated on the ground with a hint of awe.

They were all photon information sealed in Light Cubes with each edge two inches long. Even so, in this world, they were true humans with intellect and souls. As expected, however, out of the ten in a line at the very front, half of them were strange-looking monsters.

The ten generals who were called «***Feudal Lords***» and the Knights and Sorcerers who trailed behind them, and the garrisoned army of 50,000 outside the city, were all [Units] given to Gabriel. From now on, he must appropriately utilize these pawns to annihilate the defenses of the Human World and capture «Alice».

But, unlike real-time strategy games in the real world, these Units were not freely controllable with a mouse and keyboard. They must be led and ordered with presence and spoken word.

Gabriel rose wordlessly from the throne, took a few steps forward, and turned to look into a mirror hung on the wall.

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What reflected was himself, wearing a look that was in slightly bad taste.

Only the shape of his face and his extremely light brown hair were the same as Gabriel's look in the real world. But, a black metal crown encrusted with a crimson crystal rested on his head; on top of a black suede undershirt and pants, he wore a luxurious midnight fur gown. A rapier gleaming with a dreamy phosphorescence hung from his waist, and his boots and gloves were weaved with silver embroidery. On his back, he wore a blood red long cape.

Turning his eyes to the right, a step below the throne, he saw a Knight with both hands behind his head, frantically looking around.

Inside a suit of armor gleaming deep purple like a gemstone was Vassago Cazares, who had logged in at the same time as Gabriel. Although he had already been told not to speak without restraint before the situation is in control , he still resisted expressing his impress with slangs with a difficult expression, clanking around in his shoes.

Gabriel shook his head slightly, and pulled his eyes back to himself in the mirror.

He was used to tailor-made suits, so this attire felt very uncomfortable anyway. But, in this «Underworld», Gabriel was not the CTO of a private military company.

He was the emperor who ruled the boundless ***Dark Territory***.

Also — he was a god.

Gabriel closed his eyes, took a slow, deep breath, and exhaled.

Somewhere in his consciousness, the role he was playing as switched from the [Tough Commander] to a [Merciless Emperor] with a click.

Opening his eyes again, as he turned, tossing back his crimson cape, Gabriel — Vector, the God of Darkness, glared at the ten Generals and said with an absolutely inhuman tone that resounded in the Throne Room:

"Lift your heads and report your names. —You go first."

Chapter 17 – Dark Territory

The kneeling middle-aged man at the left of the frontmost line jerked up with an unexpectedly quick motion and reported his name in fluent Japanese.

"Y, y-yes, Your Majesty! I am Lengil Gira Scobo, head of the Commerce and Industry Guild!"

Besides the man who lowered his head and prostrated again, an enormous figure as large as a small mountain began to move.

On the body of a Demihuman that stood nearly 12 feet tall, glossy black chains were hung in a cross, with the skins of some wild beast wrapped around its waist. Vigorously raising its face along with its weirdly long nose, the Demihuman introduced itself with a deep voice, so low that it sounded like the ground was shaking:

"Elder of the Giants, Sigrosig."

While Gabriel was having difficulty in swallowing the fact that this monster had intelligence and a soul, the third man let out an annoying, hoarse sound:

"...Leader of the Assassin Guild... Fer Za..."

When compared to the Giant, the figure in hooded robe was so skinny that it seemed insubstantial; its age cannot be determined, let alone its gender.

Although Gabriel wanted for a split second to order it to raise its head so he could see its face, he considered that Assassins must have some rule that forbid them to expose their appearances, so he put that aside and turned towards the next general.

Then, with great effort, he managed to hold back a frown.

The existence that was the absolute embodiment of "ugly" sat motionlessly in front of him. It was unable to kneel as its legs were too short. A chubby, rotund stomach filled with fat gave off an oily luster; on a neck that was combined with shoulders dangled skulls of small animals.

The head on top looked 70% pig and 30% human. With a protruding, flat nose, and a mouth with visible teeth, only its small, beady eyes flashed with human intellect, making this even more disturbing.

Chapter 17 – Dark Territory

"Elder of the Orcs, Rilpirin."

Hearing this high and sharp voice, Gabriel immediately wondered whether it was male or female, but instantly abandoned this thought. Since it was an Orc, it would definitely be a low-level Unit in the army. Just something disposable.

Then, what could be described as a boy raised his head and energetically saluted. His reddish golden hair was curled, and he wore only a leather belt on his sun-tanned copper-colored upper body. Putting skintight leather pants and sandals on the lower body, and both hands clad in punching gloves decorated with metallic square nails.

"Tenth Generation Champion of the Fighter's Guild, Iskhan!!"

Gabriel looked at the youngster who shouted full of energy, and thought for a moment. *A fist fighter is a boxer, isn't he? A soldier for empty-handed combat?*

As he was thinking, there suddenly came the "**grrrh"** moan of a beast.

The one who suddenly raised its head was a Demihuman who was not as tall and muscular as a giant, but possessed a body far from that of a human. Its upper body was nearly completely covered with long hairs. Judging by its completely beast-like head, those hairs weren't clothing, but its own fur.

It looked a lot like a wolf. A protruding snout, saw-like teeth, and triangular ears. An incoherent noise leaked from its mouth, from which hung a long tongue:

"**Gurr…** Elder… of the Ogres… Furgur…. **Rrr**…"

Although Gabriel didn't know whether that was a name or mere mumbling, he nodded lightly and looked towards the next position.

Just then came an earsplitting shrill squeak:

"I am Hagasi, Elder of the Mountain Goblins! Your Majesty, please grant our brave race the honorable position of the vanguard!!"

The owner of the voice was a short Demihuman with a monkey-like bald head with two thin, long, protruding ears. No matter if it was by height or muscle mass, it was

far, far off from the Giant, Orc, Ogre, or even Human who had previously reported their names.

According to the explanation that Critter had provided before they Dived in, in this Dark Territory, there was only one rule. That was, [power dominates all]. If so, what power did the Goblins have in order to be promoted to a position comparable to other races while they seemed weak no matter how he looked at it?

No matter what, although it was the lowest-level Unit, lower even than Orcs, Gabriel looked at the Mountain Goblin's face with slight interest, and nodded lightly to himself as a sign of successfully answering his own question: it was because of the extreme, intense lust swirling in the Mountain Goblin's small eyes.

Just as the Elder of the Mountain Goblin finished his sentence, the Demihuman besides him who differed only in skin color shrieked in the same way:

"That's ridiculous! Compared to those guys, we'll serve Your Majesty ten times more effectively! I am the Elder of the Plains Goblins, Kuberi!"

"What the hell are you saying, you slug-eater? Has your brain swelled up because of the wet mud!?"

"You're the one who dried up your noodles in the sun!!"

In front of the two cursing shrilly at each other—

Pachi! Blue sparks flew forth as the Goblin leaders jumped out of the way, shrieking.

"—-You two are in the presence of His Majesty the Emperor!"

With a flirtatious voice, a young female wrapped in clothing that exposed much of her skin retracted her raised right hand. The sparks faded away as soon as she rubbed her thumb on her index finger, as though igniting a lighter flame.

She slowly stood up, bowed as though she was flaunting her full body and coquettish looks and saluted exaggeratedly. To Gabriel's right, Vassago whistled softly, as if he couldn't help it.

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Her mocha-colored skin gleamed as if it had been brushed with oil; her chest and waist were covered only with enamel leather. Her boots were needle-like high-heeled boots. On her back hung a fur mantle shining black and silver. Long platinum blonde hair hung below her waist.

Her eye-shadow and lipstick were the color of water; seductively narrowing her light blue eyes brighter than her makeup, the woman reported her name:

"Leader of the Dark Sorcerer Guild, D.I.L. I have 3,000 Sorcerers under my command, and my body and soul all belong to Your Majesty."

To these flirtatious movements and tempting voice, Gabriel, who had never been controlled by sexual desire, merely nodded.

The Witch called D blinked a few times, as though she wanted to say something else, but only saluted and kneeled again.

A wise decision, Gabriel thought, and turned his eyes onto the last general Unit.

The silently genuflecting figure here was a Human, but a middle-aged man of surprising size.

His full-body black armor had innumerable scratches on it, but still shone with a blurred glow. On the bowed face, there were visible light scars on his forehead and the bridge of his nose as well.

Without lifting his face up, a slightly rough baritone came out of the bowed man's mouth.

"Dark Knight Commander Biksul Ul Shasta. Before devoting my sword… I wish to ask Your Majesty."

The face that suddenly rose shared the same serious qualities as the few [real soldiers] that Gabriel had seen.

Especially, behind those sharp eyes, there was a certain kind of determination that was completely missing from the other nine generals. The Knight called Shasta stared at Gabriel with a gaze that looked almost piercing, and continued in a low voice:

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"What, is Your Majesty looking forward to, returning to the Throne at this moment?"

As expected — These men are not simple programs.

I must remind myself of this constantly, Gabriel thought, and with the mask of a [Merciless Emperor], produced an ice-cold response:

"Blood and terror. Flames and destruction. Death and screaming."

Gabriel's hard voice that resembled sliced metal resounded in the hall; the expressions of all ten generals tightened immediately.

Looking one by one at the ten faces, Gabriel flipped his robe, raised his right hand and pointed at the western sky.

From within his mouth, lines filled with false desire for conquest automatically erupted:

"...Of the western land loaded with the powers of the gods who exiled me from the heavens, the protective «Great Gate» will now fall. I have returned... To proclaim my power to all!"

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From Critter, he had learned the most he could about the «Final Load Test» that was about to commence after a week in internal time. Gabriel added the information to his tirade, continuing in a dramatic tone:

"When the Gate falls, the Human World shall fall into the hands of my subjects, the People of Darkness! All I desire is the «Holy Maiden» that shall appear in that land by then! I shall grant you all the right to do with all other Humans as you wish! The promised time that all People of Darkness awaited — has arrived!!"

The air that had become silent once again—

Was shattered by shrill, savage screams.

"**Giiii!!** Kiilll!! Kill those white Iiiuuums!!"

The one stamping its feet and screaming was the Orc leader, its eyes rolling with anger and desire. Immediately, two Goblins raised their arms and followed suit.

"**Hooooou!!** War!! War!!"

"**Urra——!!** War, war——!!"

The battle cry instantly spread to other generals and the officers behind them. The black robes among the Assassin Guild billowed along with bodies as thin as twigs; the Witches among the Dark Sorcerer Guild released colorful sparks with flirtatious shrieks.

In the entire wide hall that was filled with primal howls—

Gabriel noticed that only the Knight called Shasta maintained his kneeling position, without a sliver of movement.

Was it due to a soldier's self-control, or was it due to certain inner thoughts? It was indiscernible from the statue-like armor.

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"I didn't expect bro to have that kind of talent! Ain't it better for you to become an actor?!"

Gabriel snorted at Vassago's wretched grin, who threw a bottle of wine to Gabriel.

"Only when necessary. It'd be better for you to remember the speaking techniques just now. Since your rank is higher than theirs."

He popped the cork of the bottle with his finger; holding some of the ruby-colored liquid in his mouth, he wondered whether he should drink during a mission.

Vassago crudely drank the vintage wine as though it was beer; he belched and replied as he wiped his mouth:

"Compared with orders or playing the part or whatever, I just wanna kill on the front line. You don't Dive into this powerful VR everyday… This wine, this bottle, everything looks real to me."

"Comparatively, it's going to hurt and bleed if you're cut. The Pain Absorber doesn't work in here."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

Vassago smirked and shrugged. Gabriel set his bottle down on the table and stood up from the sofa.

The top floor of Obsidia was the Emperor's private room. It was not inferior at all compared to the lavish decor in the office of GlowGen DS headquarters, and in addition, the faraway night scenery was visible from an enormous window. Although not as bright and colorful as that of San Diego, it had a different, fantasy look.

The ten generals with the statuses of Feudal Lords left the castle to prepare for battle, and torchlights danced non-stop, belonging to the porters moving resources from the storage rooms.

The Head of the Commerce and Industry Guild, who had the role of replenishing supplies, had been ordered to deplete all stored stocks of food and equipment in the city, so the soldiers should not suffer from cold or hunger.

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Turning his eyes away from the countless lights, Gabriel walked to a corner of the room, touching the purple crystal plate that was set there — a system console.

He rapidly manipulated the menu and pressed the button to call an external observer. The time acceleration ratio decreased, and with a strange feeling of going back to 1:1, he heard Critter's quick-mouthed voice:

"Captain?! I literally just came back to the control room after watching you Dive in!!"

"It's already the first night here. Although I understand it, time acceleration is quite fascinating. Anyway, everything is proceeding as planned. The preparation of the Units will be finished in one or two days, and in two days, an attack against the Human Empire is planned."

"Great. Remember, after securing «Alice», please bring her there and use the menu to eject her into the Main Control Room, then «Alice»'s Light Cube will be ours. Also, please tell that idiot Vassago what I said."

As though he had heard Critter, Vassago's short curse came from behind.

"I can't operate with administrator privileges right now, so reconfiguring account data is impossible. In other words, Captain, if you or Vassago [die] in that world, you can no longer use that super account. You'll only be able to start over with a small soldier!"

"Yeah… I know. I won't go to the front lines for now. Any movement from the JSDF?"

"None right now. It seems like they haven't noticed you guys Diving in yet."

"Good. Then, I'll cut the connection now. The next time I contact you, it'll be when we're preparing to leave after securing Alice."

"Understood, good luck."

He closed the communication window, and with a slight sense of incongruity, the world returned to the accelerated ratio.

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Vassago was still aside, muttering and cursing while wrestling with a buckle on his armor, and finally threw off all of his outerwear; he stood up in just a leather shirt and pants.

“Hey, bro. Why not go have some fun in the city… We can’t, can we?”

“Just resist the temptation for now. After getting the target, I’ll give you a night.”

“Understood. So, no killing no women for today… Then I’ll head off to bed like a good boy. The room over there is mine.”

His joints creaking as he stretched, Vassago disappeared into a neighboring bedroom, and Gabriel took off his crown, exhaling.

He put his gown and robe on the sofa, and threw his sword on top.

In VR games he had played before, the equipment he took off would return to the item storage, but it seems like there were no such conveniences in this world. After a month of living in this room, it would become extremely messy, but he would be leaving the castle the day after tomorrow, and the next time he came back it would be time to log out.

As he unbuttoned his shirt and opened the door across from Vassago’s room, Gabriel’s eyes narrowed in surprise.

In the frighteningly large bedroom, besides the colossal luxury bed — there was a small silhouette, kneeled on the ground.

He should have already ordered everyone, including the servants, not to enter the floor above the Throne Room. There was actually someone who would defy the order of a god; what on earth was this?

For a split-second he wanted to go back and get his sword, but Gabriel entered the bedroom anyway, and closed the door.

“…Who is it?”

He called shortly.

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The answer was a slightly hoarse voice.

"...Please allow me to serve as your sleeping partner[1] tonight."

"Huh?"

Furrowing his brow in surprise, Gabriel slowly walked to the bed in the dark bedroom.

The one with both hands on the ground actually was a young woman in thin clothes. Her ash-blue hair was tied high with a decorative ribbon. From the slightly visible lines, he could not see signs of any weapons.

He sat down on the vibrantly colored silk sheets and inquired:

"Whose order was this?"

After a slight pause, the woman replied in a thin voice:

"Nobody... This is only my duty."

"Is that so?"

Gabriel turned away his eyes and fell back in the center of the bed.

Seconds later, the woman straightened her upper body and glided onto his right side without a sound.

"Please excuse me..."

Even Gabriel could not help but marvel at the beauty of the exotic-looking lady whispering to him. Her skin tone was slightly dark, but the area around her cheekbones revealed a noble temperament of someone from somewhere in Northern Europe.

Watching the woman softly undo her thin clothing and prepare to loosen her decorative hair tie, Gabriel experienced a certain moving.

Would an artificial Fluctlight actually do something like this?

[1] The specific language used here refers to women selected by emperors to sleep with

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Even this lady is still not an incomplete AI? If so, to what extent of completion would the finished Alice have achieved?

What moved Gabriel, were not the actions of the woman devoting her body.

It was not like that—

She quickly pulled a small, sharp knife out of her hair and raised it high as Gabriel predicted.

Gabriel grabbed the woman's hand with ease and his other hand flashed, snatching the woman's throat and pushing her down onto the bed.

"Kuh…!!"

The woman clenched her teeth tightly and fought back with all her might, attempting to thrust the small knife. Her wrist strength was greater than expected, but not enough to make Gabriel nervous. He twisted the woman's arm all the way back, and lightly pressed his thumb into her windpipe, restricting her movements.

Although the woman's face contorted in excruciating pain, the determination flashing in her gray eyes did not weaken in the slightest. From her fierce expression just now, her incomplete makeup and toned body, she was definitely not a professional Assassin. This meant the one with rebellious thoughts was not the leader of the Assassins, Fer Za, but one of the other nine generals — most likely within the Human generals.

Edging his face slightly closer, Gabriel repeated the same question he had asked before.

"Whose order is this?"

She replied with the same tone.

"It is my own… will."

"Then, to whom do you report?"

"…Nobody."

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"Hmph."

Gabriel thought as a machine without any sliver of emotion.

«RATH» wanted to break the boundaries of an artificial Fluctlight, which was their nature to be unable to disobey all rules, laws, and orders from people of a higher priority.

Compared to the Human World Fluctlights bound by countless laws, the inhabitants of the Dark Territory seemed able to live more freely, but their nature had not changed. It was only because there was but one rule for the Fluctlights here that they felt free on the surface.

That rule was [power dominates all]. This was a dog-eat-dog world in which people with higher power could dominate those under them. If RATH's experiment proceeded as they had planned, the orderly Human World and the chaotic Land of Darkness would clash violently even without Gabriel's intervention, and would end in a breakthrough by war.

But he did not know why, before the plan had proceeded into that stage, there came a Fluctlight in the Human World that had exceeded the boundaries. The spy within RATH had not sent any information regarding a similar existence in the Land of Darkness.

In other words, this woman who had plotted to kill the Emperor with a small knife was also a soul bound by absolute law. Even so, from the situation that even under Gabriel's questioning just now, no, under his order, she did not divulge the identity of her master. It proves that this woman, even under the order of Gabriel, an Emperor who was also a god, she prioritized her loyalty to her master. That is, she thought her master [stronger] than the Emperor.

In that case, to ensure that the battle goes smoothly, it was necessary to properly display his strength to the general and officer Units, to show them that Gabriel — Emperor Vector was the strongest in this world. But, he couldn't completely destroy the valuable general Units. What should he do—

No.

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He had to dispose of one of the generals anyway. A certain person who put the murderous spirit in this woman.

How should he single out the traitor? Should he contact Critter again, to have him supervise the general Units from outside? No, that would require adjusting the time acceleration ratio back to 1:1, and would waste precious time in the real world.

Then—

Considering this matter in an instant, Gabriel scrutinized the woman's iron-colored eyes again.

"What is your reason for killing me? Were you offered money? Or status?"

He did not need to think about his questions. But the answer he immediately heard was unexpected.

"For righteousness!"

"Oh…?"

"If you wage war now, the world will fall back a hundred years, no, two hundred years! I cannot let you return the era to when the weak were trampled upon!!"

Again, Gabriel felt a sliver of shock.

Was this woman really in the stage before her boundaries were broken? If so, did her master make her say these lines?

Gabriel brought his head closer, gazing straight into those gray eyes.

Determination. Loyalty. The feeling deep within was…

Ah, so it's like that.

If that was the case, then there was no more need for this woman. To be precise, there was no more need for this woman's Fluctlight.

Gabriel complied with his own decision, and without another word, applied force to his left hand, which grasped the woman's throat.

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He felt bones being crushed. The woman's eyes widened, and her mouth let out a silent scream.

Tightly restraining her struggling limbs, mercilessly tightening his grip around her neck, Gabriel felt a surprise unlike what he felt before.

Was this really a virtual world? No matter if it was the feeling of muscle and bone breaking that was felt by his left hand, or the frightening, painful smell that came from the bare skin, they all stimulated Gabriel's five senses much more realistically than the real world.

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His body trembled unconsciously, and his left hand reflexively closed.

With a muffled crunch, the cervical vertebrae of the unnamed woman were crushed.

Then, Gabriel saw it.

From the forehead of the woman with eyes tightly closed and teeth clenched — floated a prismatic glow.

This, definitely was it — the Soul Cloud once he had seen when he took away Alicia's life.

In an instant, Gabriel opened his mouth wide, and sucked in every trace of the woman's soul.

The bitterness of fear, pain.

The sourness of regret and melancholy.

Following these, Gabriel's tongue was soaked in the heavenly sweet nectar that could not be described with words.

Behind his closed eyelids, a hazy scene was shining.

Small children were playing in the front yard of an old two-story home. There were Humans, Goblins, and Ogres. As they looked over, bright smiles appeared on their faces, and they came running, arms wide open.

That vision vanished, and was replaced with a certain topless man. A wide, thoroughly exercised chest, tenderly, powerfully embracing her.

"I…love you… Your Excellency…"

A tiny voice came, reverberated, and faded away.

After all had disappeared, Gabriel still tightly hugged the woman's body.

Beautiful. How beautiful of an experience.

Gabriel's consciousness was largely shaken in ecstasy, but shards of logic attempted to find out the reason for this phenomenon.

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The Light Cube that held this deceased woman's Fluctlight was connected with Gabriel's Fluctlight through the STL. Therefore, after her Life, or Hit Points became zero, fragments of her released quantum data could abnormally flow to Gabriel through the network.

But, that kind of theory already mattered nothing to Gabriel.

He experienced once more the [phenomenon] that he had been chasing for his entire life. Gabriel extracted and tasted all traces of the woman's last emotion — [love]. That was like a drop of nectar falling into a stark desert.

More.

More.

More slaughter.

Gabriel's body threw back in a wide arc, and he let out a wordless guffaw.

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Ordering the ten generals and the core members of each legion to line up neatly again, Gabriel watched them with a satisfied look as they respectfully bowed down.

Under his orders, they had completed preparations for the attack in two days. By the looks of it, maybe these Units were even more excellent than the fellows sitting on the floor of directors in GlowGen DS.

Really, they should just be classified as [finished products]. The perfect ability to carry out orders, with added loyalty. As AIs piloting robots in war, what else would you need on top of that?

Even so, it should not be forgotten that their loyalty was based on the bug lying in artificial Fluctlights that RATH had been eagerly trying to get rid of. It was only because the general principle [power dominates all] was carved into their souls that

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these ten people would obey the Emperor, Gabriel — no, Vector. But at the same time, it could also mean that as soon as Gabriel's power was suspected, anyone could rebel at any moment.

This suspicion had already come true.

In the night two days ago, a female assassin sneaked into his bedroom.

That woman planned to kill the Emperor, who had the highest authority. In her heart, there was a master with a status higher than Gabriel. Someone she called [Your Excellency] at her last moments. And that person, almost for certain, was one of the ten generals in sight.

To her, against Emperor Vector, her own master was the mightier one. Then, the likelihood of the so-called "Your Excellency" not declaring his absolute loyalty to Gabriel was very high. If he took a Unit like this to battle, there would also be the likelihood of being betrayed.

Therefore, the last task before they went to battle was to single out and dispose of [Your Excellency] from the ten people before him.

At the same time, he could demonstrate the power of the Emperor to the remaining nine, forever carving the identity of the strongest into their Fluctlights.

At this time, Gabriel Miller did not consider at all the probability of any of the ten Units before him catching him off guard — in other words, defeating him in a one-on-one fight. To him, the Underworld was no more than an extension of VR games, and was still under the set impression that all Units here were [NPCs].

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Dark Knight Commander Biksul Ul Shasta maintained his genuflected position, recalling his mentor's words from twenty years ago, in the Dark Knight headquarters training field.

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"…My mentor's mentor's head was taken off and he died instantly. My mentor was then cut in the chest and died on the way back to the castle. But even though I lost an arm, I'm alive today. Well, that's nothing to be proud of, though."

His mentor said this, sitting on the glossy black floor with his legs folded under his torso[2], as he showed his right arm stump sharply severed on the elbow to Shasta. The wound that was only bound with medicine and gauze seemed painful just by looking at it.

The one who had gave him this injury about three days ago, was the eternal enemy of the Dark Knights, or the most powerful swordsman in the world, or the most ferocious monster — Integrity Knight Bercouli Synthesis One.

"Do you know what this means, Biksul?"

Twenty-year-old Biksul could only scratch his head in confusion. His mentor slid a hand under his clothes, closed his eyes, and continued softly:

"We're catching up, gradually."

"Catching up — to that person?"

Young Shasta could not help mixing disbelief into his voice. Just three days ago, Bercouli had demonstrated his crushing swordsmanship. In the instant that his mentor's arm flew high, spurting blood, the piercing feeling that chilled him to the bone like a pillar of ice still lingered today.

"I'll be 50 this year. Even so, I still don't feel like I'm holding my sword in the best way, let alone swinging. I think, in five years to ten years' time, that won't change even after I die."

His mentor said quietly.

"…That way, we short-lived people are unable to achieve what that immortal living for more than 200 years can do. Although it's pretty embarrassing, even in the instant that our swords cross, I still kept it in mind. But after fleeing following a miserable defeat, I realized that this is wrong. All this time, my mentor and all the

[2] Most likely the seiza position. More info here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seiza

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Knights in the past have endlessly challenged that man, but it wasn't all in vain… Biksul, what is the strongest swordsmanship?"

To this sudden question, Biksul answered reflexively:

"A «Slash of Thoughtlessness»."

"Very good. Through long years of training, you unify with your sword. One strike that you don't think of how to cut, draw, or move would be the ultimate swordsmanship. My mentor taught me this, and I have taught you the same. But… Biksul, that's not it. There's something stronger. I've realized it since I've been cut by that monster."

A hint of excitement floated onto his mentor's aged, wrinkled face. Shasta maintained his leg-folded seating position, leaned forward, and asked:

"Something stronger… That is?"

"The opposite of thoughtlessness. Firm confidence. It's the power of will, Biksul."

Suddenly, his mentor stood up from the wooden floor, and waved his right arm stump vigorously.

"You see. Back then, I sliced down with a right diagonal slash. It was exactly a thoughtless attack; the fastest I have ever swung my sword in my life. At that moment when I drew my sword, I already had the advantage."

"Yes… I thought so as well."

"But… But. Normally, my sword should've bounced off his defense, but he pressed my sword back, and this arm was sliced off… Can you believe it, Biksul; in that moment, his sword didn't even touch mine!"

Shasta kept silent, and shook his head dubiously.

"H… How could this…"

"It's the truth. It was like… the very path of the sword, was completely altered by some unseen force. It's not a spell, nor is it the Armament Full Control Art. We can

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only explain it like this: my Slash of Thoughtlessness was defeated by his willpower built up with two hundred years of hard training. Because he pictured where he wanted my sword to go so intensely, it became the unchanging truth!"

Shasta was unable to immediately believe his mentor's words.

The power of will: something amorphous like that can defeat a real, heavy, rigid sword; no matter what, that can't be real.

It looked like that Shasta's mentor expected this reaction. Suddenly regaining the formality in his sitting position, on the glossy black floor, he calmly ordered:

"Okay, Biksul. I'll teach you my last sword technique. — Cut me."

"What… What are you saying! It's difficult for you to…"

Have lived so long; Shasta could only swallow these words. Suddenly, his mentor's eyes flashed with a strong light.

"Since I managed to live on, there is even more necessity for you to cut me. Since I've been defeated by that man in one stroke, I'm no longer the strongest in your heart. As long as I live, you're unable to battle that man on equal footing. Cut, no, kill me, and stand at the same height as him… Bercouli!!"

His mentor finished and stood, holding his right arm stump as though he was gripping a sword.

"Now, stand up! Draw your sword, Biksul!!"

Biksul cut his mentor, and ended his life.

At the same time, he realized with his body the meaning of his mentor's words.

The invisible sword that his mentor's severed right hand held — the sword called [will], let out intense sparks as it crossed with Shasta's sword, and marked an eternal wound on his face.

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His face stained with tears and blood, the young Shasta stood at the zenith that exceeded the «Slash of Thoughtlessness» — on the border of the «Slash of Incarnation».

Time passed — Five years ago.

Shasta finally challenged the archenemy of the Dark Knights, Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli. He was but 37 years old, but he felt that his sword had achieved the highest.

His mentor had exchanged an arm for his life, but Shasta had no intention of returning defeated. Because Shasta had no apprentice as his successor. He did not want his young apprentice to have the executioner's burden, and bear the destiny of having his life sliced away. He decided to put his life on the line, and sever the blood-stained cycle there and then.

The sword called [will] that carried with it all determination and realization, during its first cross with Bercouli's, was not deflected at all. But in that instant, Shasta already predicted his own loss. He did not think that he could reproduce a slash of such power.

But, as they crossed swords, Bercouli laughed roughly:

"Your swordsmanship isn't bad. If you only have murderous intent, you will be unable to block my sword. Go back and think long and hard about the meaning behind my words, and return after five years, little boy."

Then the Integrity Knight Commander turned and left. But Shasta didn't know why he was unable to swing his sword towards the Knight's back, which looked full of openings.

To understand the meaning behind Bercouli's words, it took a very long time. But he finally understood what happened now, five years later. Then, if Shasta had swung his sword only with hatred and the intent to kill, he would have immediately been defeated. Although it was only one round, he was able to clash with him because he held a realization much heavier than murderous intent.

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That was — gratitude to the mentors who put their life on the line to pass on their knowledge, and a prayer for the young one who will become his successor.

Therefore, after receiving news of the Highest Minister's death, Shasta immediately decided to negotiate for peace. He was confident that, if the other party was Bercouli, he would definitely accept.

For the same reason—

This Emperor Vector, who suddenly descended on Obsidia and decided to wage war without saying anything else, must be cut to death by Shasta himself.

Even as he kneeled and bowed his head, Shasta was shaping out the [Incarnation] that he must load his killing Slash with.

This Emperor that left the Dark World for hundreds of years and suddenly revived was a young man with white skin and golden hair, similar to that of a Human World resident. His figure and looks were not necessarily charismatic.

But, only his extraordinarily blue eyes revealed that the Emperor was not an ordinary man. Within those eyes was a [void]. A bottomless abyss sucking in all light. This man concealed a colossal and evil hunger.

If his exercised Power of Incarnation was engulfed by the Emperor's void, the blade would be unable to reach him.

If that happened, Dark Knight Shasta would lose his life. But, his will would likely be succeeded by someone after him.

His only regret was that he was unable to convey his determination as he did not see Lipia yesterday. She might be busy with preparation before the attack, or staying in her important [home].

If he told her his intent to slay the Emperor, she would definitely not listen and beg to join him. It was better this way.

Shasta slowly inhaled, building up.

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With his hand, he quietly touched the sword that was released from his belt and placed on the floor.

He was about 15 Mel from the throne. He only had to take two steps to reach it.

He must not let anyone notice. He must be thoughtless in drawing his sword.

Purifying and contracting his Power of Incarnation to the limit, he injected it into his sword through his fingers. Then, he emptied his body.

His left hand gripped the sword—

Just then.

The Emperor spoke nonchalantly with a sound as smooth and rigid as glass:

"Just — last night, someone infiltrated my bedroom. With a short knife concealed in their hair."

A suppressed gasp wavered the air in the hall.

In the line of the other nine Feudal Lords to Shasta's left, someone softly held their breath, another let out a low moan from the depths of their throat, and another shrank back into their thick robes. A few among the officers in the back made sounds as well.

Shasta was equally shocked. Maintaining his stance and style before slicing, he thought for an instant.

Besides himself, there were others who came to the conclusion of eliminating the Emperor. Unfortunately, the fact that the Emperor was still alive showed that they had failed — but which of the nine people sent out the assassin?

Not the five Demihuman generals. Passing over the Giant, Ogre, and Orc, even the shorter Goblins were unlikely to have dodged the eyes and ears of the guards and infiltrated the top floor.

If he considered the four Human generals, he could first exclude the young leader of the Fighters, Iskahn, and the leader of the Commerce and Industry Guild, Lengil.

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Iskahn was just a straightforward boy who purely aimed at improving his empty-handed combat to the maximum, and Lengil would love to make a lot of money out of the war.

Since the attacker had infiltrated the bedroom, the leader of the Assassin Guild, Fer Za, was the most suspicious, and he actually had a few hints for what that man was thinking, but it was puzzling that a short knife was used.

In the inner depths of dark caves, the Assassin Guild specially researched the third power apart from Dark Sorcery and Martial Arts: [Poison]. The race of Fer Za was an organization formed to survive, by those who were not gifted on Priority when it came to controlling weapons and spells. They had a unique restriction: their only allowed weapons were hidden needles and blow darts coated with poison. Short knives were not included.

In the same reasoning, the leader of the Dark Sorcerers kneeling right beside Shasta, D.I.L., would be out of the consideration. This woman with only desire for status, although she could have considered taking and raising high the Emperor's head, becoming the dominator of the Land of Darkness, the Sorcerers under D would have used spells instead of a short knife.

Looking at it like that, the one who sent the assassin was not any one of the nine generals.

The one left — could only be himself, the Dark Knight Commander Shasta.

However, he had not the slightest memory of doing that. He had already decided, when he was going to eliminate the Emperor, he would swing his sword with his own life on the line. Of course he didn't give an assassination order to any of his men, or even the decision that he had kept secret, not once—

No.

No...

Could it be?

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After the Emperor finished his words, Shasta thought only for the blink of an eye, and noticed that his left finger on his sword grip had instantly become ice cold.

What was originally sharp, surging determination instantly transformed. Fear. Anxiety. Terror. Then — it became a certainty of impending misfortune.

Almost at the same time, Emperor Vector opened his mouth a second time:

"I don't want to question right now, regarding the name of the one who sent the assassin. Souls that use their own power in a desire to obtain more power are excellent. If you want my head, cut me whenever my back is turned."

The Emperor looked arrogantly at the bustling hall, and for the first time, an emotion floated onto his white face — a shallow, light smile.

"Of course, I hope that you all understand that this kind of gamble carries with it an equal price. For example… like this."

From within his dark robes, a hand extended and made a soft gesture.

Then, set besides the throne, a small door on the wall east of Shasta opened soundlessly, and a servant girl shuffled in. She held a large silver bowl in her hands: inside was a cube-shaped object, but it was obscured with a black cloth, so it couldn't be seen in detail.

The servant girl set the silver bowl in front of the throne, bowed her head respectfully to the Emperor, and exited through the door.

In the deafening silence, the Emperor wore a crooked smile, extended a toe, placed it against the cloth covering the bowl, and kicked it off.

Shasta, whose entire body, even his thoughts, were frozen, caught sight of —

An ice cube, as transparent as the most perfect crystal.

Sealed inside, was the forever sleeping face of his lover.

"Li…pi…"

Shasta's lips moved soundlessly.

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The coldness that enveloped his entire body disappeared, and was replaced with endlessly deep, dark emptiness in his heart.

Shasta knew that Dark Knight Lipia Zankehl was secretly running an orphanage. No matter the races, she sheltered and educated children who had lost their parents, siblings, and were about to die on the street. Shasta saw a hopeful future in Lipia's actions.

Therefore, Shasta only told Lipia his own ideals. An endless dream in which the long-term state of war with the Human World would be broken, and a mutually supportive world in which there would be no need for constant snatching and seizing would be created.

But, his own words had driven Lipia to attempt to assassinate the Emperor, and ended in this grievous result. Although it was the Emperor who killed her — Shasta also had a hand in it.

Doubtlessly.

Although it was only for a blink of an eye, a storm of insurmountable guilt and remorse raged in Shasta's empty-feeling chest.

Instantly, it became a black chunk of emotion.

Murderous intent.

Kill. He must kill that lightly smiling man sitting cross-legged on the throne, no matter what.

Even if he needed to put his own life, and the future of the Dark Territory on the line.

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***

Now, who is that suspicious [Your Excellency]?

Gabriel watched the ten prostrated Leader Units under his eyes with a little bit of interest.

The master of the assassin woman whom she so loved. Gabriel had sucked dry all traces of the emotions that tasted of heavenly nectar, that had been released during the woman's death: not just the yearning of the woman, he even understood the feelings that [Your Excellency] had for the woman herself — although he just analyzed the emotional patterns as data.

Therefore, he was confident that when he showed the woman's head, the one called Your Excellency would definitely take action. He would mercilessly execute the opposing, rebellious Unit, and increase the loyalty of the rest of the Units through fear. No different from the simulation games he had played to kill time in the real world.

What a bunch of pitiful and happy people.

Although they have real souls, their intelligence is limited, and can be reproduced as much as one wants even if they are killed and killed again. There will eventually be a day, when the Underworld, its Mainframe, and the Light Cubes are mine, the hunger that has so pained me ever since I was young will be quenched.

Leaning his face against his wrist supported by the throne armrest, Gabriel waited, relaxed.

He was a little more than 15 meters from the Units. No matter what attack from any weapon, he could easily counter it with the sword equipped on his left waist.

Of course, he would be unable to deal with a [System Call] prefixed command attack. But Gabriel's anxiety had already been wiped clean before they logged in.

The super account «God of Darkness Vector» was set up for RATH workers to undertake forced operations to the Dark Territory. Therefore, the HP called Life

would be massive, the equipped sword would be the strongest; and on top of all, Vector possessed a cheating attribute to prevent all commands targeting him.

As Gabriel was protected under so many conditions, even as the leftmost Knight out of the ten Units, clad in jet-black armor, bent his back violently.

Even as his entire body was covered with a halo like a light shadow.

Even as he saw the Knight's left hand gripping his sword's scabbard as fast as lightning, flicking up his head at the same time, sharp eyes flashing an inhuman crimson from the middle of his iron face—

He did not fully understood what had happened sequentially as he failed to realize the two facts below:

This world, was not only a program executed by a physical server, but also a «Real Dream» that was built with the same photons which human Fluctlights were made out of.

And, because of this, the pure and intense murderous intent created by the Knight in black, from his Light Cube to the Main Visualizer, and through the photon communication circuit, could reach the STL Gabriel was using.

***

In the middle of Shasta's blood-red vision, he could only see the Emperor's figure.

With the fastest movement he had ever made in his life, he drew his sword with his right hand.

What released from its scabbard was the Divine Instrument he had inherited from his mentor, the longsword «Hazy Mist», but not in its normal form of a gray blade. True to its name, a thick mist like a night haze encircled the long blade, winding into a vortex.

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The logic behind this phenomenon, was the same as the ultimate ability of the Integrity Knights that was indiscernible even under long years of research — the Armament Full Control Art, but all of that seemed insignificant.

"**KILL!!**"

With an instantaneous scream, Shasta put all rage, hatred, and grief onto his blade, and heavily swung it over his head.

3

From the northern ends of the Human Empire, to the edge of the Eastern region.

No matter whether it was Integrity Knight Alice, or Amayori, who was born in the Western Empire, it was the first time that they had stepped into the land with the most mysteries of the four empires, the Eastern Empire Eastabarieth.

Between the rolling mountain peaks, surging rivers as blue as glass connected tortuously. The villages and streets that occasionally appeared at the river banks were different from the familiar stone architecture of the north; these were almost entirely constructed with wood.

The people who gazed up and pointed to the sky at them were all black-haired. Then Alice suddenly remembered that Fanatio, the Integrity Knight Vice Commander who could not get along with her, was born here.

Moving her eyes back forward, Alice thought: the Kirito leaning on her back and staring blankly at the sky also had jet-black hair, so could he be born in the east? Would he start to regain his memories if they could land on the streets and let him get in touch with the people here? She soon abandoned this idea, though, as they could not delay, not even a second.

Camping on rural areas at night, they had rushed full tilt for three days, living on dried fruit and fish that Amayori caught—

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In the afternoon of the second day of the eleventh month, the Mountain Range at the Edge that stood as same as its northern section, and a valley as straight as if it had been split by an axe, entered their sight.

"...Can you see it, Kirito?"

Alice muttered, gently soothing the neck of her beloved dragon that she forced to fly a long distance with a heavy load. Nowadays, since the magical beasts were virtually extinct, dragons have become the lifeforms with the highest Life and Priority. But, it was definitely not a trifle to carry two people and three Divine Instruments. The strength that Amayori had been accumulating through unrestricted fish consumption had almost been completely depleted.

*When we reach the camp, I'll definitely provide her with fresh lamb to her heart's content.*Alice thought as she shook the reins; Amayori replied with a seemingly restless shriek and vigorously flapped her wings.

The valley that seemed a crack as thin as paper from faraway was definitely not the same up close.

It was about a hundred Mel wide: wide enough for an army of Orcs or Ogres if they were to enter it in a row.

In front of the valley that straightly sliced the mountain in half, was a grassy field spread as though it was encircling the entrance. On the field, a large campsite comprised of countless white tents neatly erected in rows. Steam columns from cooking food rose here and there; around were soldiers training in formation. Alice could almost feel the flashing blades and heavy atmosphere from high up.

Morale was not as low as she had feared — but no matter what, their number was definitely too little. From a rough glance, their total number was less than 3,000. Conversely, the Dark Territory invaders must be at least 50,000. In the Human Empire, the Sacred Task of Soldier and Guard were bestowed upon extremely few; in contrast, everyone in the mountains, regardless of gender or age, was a soldier.

In this situation, it would not make much difference for Alice alone to join the battle. Just how does Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli plan to protect the world...?

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Alice deliberated as she flew over the camp; she guided the dragon towards the slight darkness of the valley.

"Sorry Amayori, just a little more."

She said; as the dragon responded with a "**kururu**", the mountain peaks obscured Solus's light.

As soon as they entered the valley, chilly air immediately enveloped their bodies. The rocky cliffs to their left and right were perfectly perpendicular, smooth surfaces that could only be the work of a god. No organisms, not even vegetation, were visible.

After slowly gliding for a few minutes—

Through the thick blanket of mist, an unbelievably colossal structure eventually became visible.

"Is this the… «Great Eastern Gate»…?"

The vertically standing gray door was probably three hundred Mel from top to bottom. Although it was not as tall as the five-hundred-Mel Central Cathedral of the Axiom Church, the gravity of both did not differentiate between heights.

The most shocking fact was that the double doors were constructed with one stone slab each, without any gap at all. An existence of this caliber naturally could not have been carved by human hands; even creation by way of Sacred Art processing would be absolutely impossible. The largest structures that the Highest Minister Administrator ever constructed were the «Immortal Walls» that divided Central Capital Centoria into four, but each stone slab that connected to form them was far smaller than this huge door.

In other words, this great door was placed here by the hand of a god in order to divide these two worlds — and, in order to instigate the tragedy that would come three hundred years later.

"Stop here, Amayori."

Having Amayori halted in the middle of the air, Alice looked again up at the great door from a closer distance.

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At the altitude of about two hundred Mel, there was Sacred Text inscribed across the pair of doors made out of gray stone slabs.

"**Destruct… At… The, last, stage…**"

Although she tried hard to pronounce one line in the middle, she had not an inkling of their meaning.

Just as she was thinking with her head tilted, suddenly, a wave of frightening scratching and cracking noises shook the air, stunning Alice and Amayori. When Alice patted the dragon's neck to comfort her and stared at the scene, she saw a portion of the great door, that had been perfectly smooth before, developing a crack that resembled lightning that was extending downward.

As the crack stretching tens of Mel long eventually stopped, bits of stone broke off around the crack, and disappeared into the deep valley.

Alice raised her head and looked again at the great gate: the cracks and falling stone were not just confined to one area. It would be better to say that the giant door was nearly covered with a mesh of fissures and cracks.

Alice gently shook the reins, coaxing Amayori as close to the great door as possible.

She gingerly reached out her left hand, rapidly drew the Seal of Stacia in midair, and softly tapped the surface of the door.

A purple «Window» popped out, describing the full Life capacity and current value of the Great Eastern Gate.

The number on the left was the highest Life she had ever seen — more than three million. But the one on the right was less than one thousandth of that: 2985. While she sitting staring at it, stunned, the current value was subtracted by one in front of her eyes.

Sweat beading on her palms, Alice counted the amount of time it took for the number to decrease. She then estimated the time until the Life would completely deplete.

"… It can't be…"

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In disbelief of her own conclusion, Alice mumbled:

"… Five days… There are only five days left……?"

The door that had stood dignified between the two worlds for over three hundred years, would collapse after five days — how was this possible?

Selka's bright smile, old man Garitta's tanned, deeply wrinkled face, and her father Gasupht's grave frown — passed through Alice's mind. It was only a few days ago that she had repelled the Goblins that had attacked them, and sealed the cave with ice. She had thought that those actions would bring peace to Rulid that could last quite some time.

As soon as the great gate collapses five days later, the Dark Army would swarm in like insects, and if our defensive army was unable to defend, the bloodsucking monsters would gush into the Human Empire like floodwater. This flood would soon reach the northern border, and Rulid would be engulfed.

"We have to… We have to do something about it…"

Alice muttered to herself as if in a dream, as she unconsciously pulled the reins. After moving away from the stone slab about to collapse, Amayori slowly rose up, and stopped roughly at the height of three hundred Mel, at the top of the door.

Behind the door, the valley continued in the same unbending way, as though splitting the mountain. However, what appeared there was not blue sky and green plains, but the blood-red sky and the desolate, cinder-speckled wilderness of the Dark Territory.

Alice did not want to see this unsettling sight, but as she narrowed her eyebrows, focusing —

On the hazy, great black landscape, a tiny waving light was visible.

Urging Amayori higher, she fixed her gaze afar. There was not just one light, but many extending outwards irregularly.

Bonfires.

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A camp. The vanguard of the Dark Army were waiting with their fists held up, for the great door to collapse and the way to the Human Empire to open.

"Five days... remaining..."

Alice mumbled softly again.

Immediately, she turned the dragon around and retraced her path towards the valley entrance. If she looked at those countless bonfires for long, she felt that she would be consumed by a massive urge to attack them alone.

Even if that really happened, if the opponent were merely Goblin or Orc foot soldiers, she was still confident that she would be able to take the heads of one or two hundred before retreating unharmed. But if there were Ogre crossbow archers or legions of Dark Sorceresses within the enemy, things would not be so easy.

Although it was said that Integrity Knights possessed the strength of a thousand in one, it was only one, after all. If a Knight was confronted with a focused long-range attack from afar where neither their swordsmanship nor their Sacred Arts were able to match, they would definitely suffer injuries. Even if the injuries were light, their Life would eventually drop to zero as injuries build up over time. That was what Knight Commander Bercouli had worried for years, the greatest weakness of the Integrity Knights — also of the Human Empire's defense.

With Administrator, the stickler for gathering power, deceased, the large amount of defense weapons buried in the Cathedral were already distributed among the hurriedly assembled guard team. But their remaining time was too little. At least, if they had 10,000 soldiers, and a year of preparation—

With a soft sigh, Alice pushed away these meaningless thoughts and motioned for Amayori to land.

At the center of the guard team camp, there was a large clearing. Seeing huge tents neatly erected beside it, Alice knew that the clearing could only be a landing field for dragons.

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Flying down and landing in an arc, Amayori turned her head to the tent as her talon just touched the grass, and let out a "**kururu**" call, as if she were trying to be cute.

Quickly, a slightly lower call responded. That was probably her brother-dragon, Takiguri. As soon as the dragon came to a stop, Alice held Kirito, jumped down onto the grass, and helped Amayori unload the heavy load on her feet. Immediately, Amayori shot excitedly towards the tent, and rubbed heads with her brother, who had extended his head out of the tent.

Alice couldn't help but smile. However, she instantly noticed footsteps approaching from behind, and frantically tightened her face. She adjusted her plain skirt and tucked her wind-blown hair behind her back.

Before she could turn around, a familiar, easygoing voice rang across the landing field.

"Mentor! My mentor Alice-sama!! I knew you would come!!"

The one sliding over with pattering footsteps was Integrity Knight Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-One, whom Alice had drunk a glass of parting wine with ten days ago. Although they were in a long-term camp, his pattan-colored long curls and silver-white armor were as spotless as always.

"... You seem spirited."

Unfazed by Alice's cold words, Eldrie was about to say a lot more as if he was deeply touched, but his lips instantly froze.

It was because he had noticed the black-haired youth that Alice supported with her left hand.

Straining one side of his face, throwing back his head, the young Knight put on a look of disbelief and said:

"So... you brought him here. Why?"

Alice threw out her chest in defiance and replied:

"It is obvious. I have sworn to protect him."

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"B-but… If the war begins, we Integrity Knights will need to be at the very front line. What do you plan to do when you are crossing swords with the enemy? To fight while carrying him on your back is definitely not the wisest decision."

"If I need to, I will do so."

Supporting Kirito's frail body that was unable to stand on its own, as if she was trying to pull it away from Eldrie's sight, Alice drew her right foot back. But, somehow, the squads of soldiers and lower Integrity Knights on break had all gathered around the landing field, looking at Alice and Kirito leaning together with surprised expressions.

To drown out the wave-like hubbub, Eldrie retorted sharply.

"You cannot burden yourself with him, my mentor! Please forgive my directness, but if you carry this useless load to battle, not only will your strength be halved, it is very likely that you will fall into danger yourself! In the coming battle, Alice-sama will…"

He interrupted himself, and suddenly pointed at the surrounding swordsmen with an ornate silver armguard.

"…be responsible as their leader in battle! How can you not give this your all?!"

He had a point. Although he was not wrong, Alice could not easily reply with 'I understand'. To herself, which one — protecting the world, protecting Kirito; both were equally important. Alice clenched her teeth as she thought of a way to explain this.

At the same time, she was somehow surprised at Eldrie's enthusiastic speech.

If compared to the Integrity Knight Eldrie that was undergoing Alice's tutoring in swordsmanship, he had changed significantly. Then, he had worshipped Alice, and had listened to her no matter what she told him to do.

The people in the world had their right eyes sealed by the mysterious «Outside Gods», absolutely not defying laws or authority. To Alice's knowledge, the only ones who have successfully broken the seal were herself, and the deceased Blue Rose Swordsman Eugeo. Even the highest minister Administrator and the sage Cardinal, said to have Authority of Gods, were unable to defy that seal.

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In other words, Eldrie was supposed to be still under the control of that seal. But now — he was not directly disobeying Alice's words — but he was definitely not in a state of [blind loyalty] like before. He could think for himself, and convey his own thoughts.

The reasons for this change was likely to be Kirito, and Eugeo.

Although he had only come into brief contact with the two biggest traitors in the world, they had certainly deeply moved Eldrie's soul.

As Alice recalled, even her sister Selka living in Rulid, occasionally revealed dissatisfaction with the formal regulations on the village and resilient figures of authority. Also, the two female students who rushed to where they were when Alice was about to take Kirito and Eugeo from Centoria Training Academy. As normal citizens, and young girls, to actually call an Integrity Knight to stop was in itself impossible.

And, not to mention — even Alice herself had been affected.

Before she crossed swords with Kirito and fell out of the Cathedral, she held not a sliver of doubt against the structure of the world, the rule of the Church, and the godliness of the Highest Minister.

However, in the time that she had to join forces with him to repel danger, accept a truce, and climb up the outer wall, Kirito's voice, sword, and pitch-black eyes strongly moved Alice — eventually breaking the Seal of the Right Eye…

Yes, Kirito is the sledgehammer that swings towards this world full of false peace and harmony. He expended the strength hidden in his soul, to move the world, shake, and eventually shatter the ancient nail calling itself the Axiom Church, that was driven into the center of the world. But, as price to pay, he sacrificed his friend Eugeo and guide Cardinal, and lost his own heart…

Alice tightly hugged the twig-like body that she supported with her left hand. Then, she looked directly at Eldrie.

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She wanted to say it. *You are who you are today because you fought him.* But, he definitely would not understand it. As far as the Integrity Knights were concerned, Kirito was still no more than a hateful traitor.

Towards Alice who stood there silently, Eldrie wore an expression that looked like he was resisting heavy pain, and just as he was about to continue.

At this time, the wall of people around them, as though parted by the hand of a giant, was suddenly cut open.

The voice that reached her ears from somewhere deep in the crowd, made Alice felt so tearfully nostalgic and painfully nervous.

"Hey, don't get so worked up, Eldrie."

Looking away from the young Knight straightening his back, Alice slowly turned around to the owner of the voice.

A front-gathered robe full of east region style worn loosely. A sash tied slightly low. A plain longsword stuck casually on his left waist. Strange wooden shoes hung off of his feet.

This was an outfit far more casual than that of those worn by the surrounding Knights and soldiers. But, the gravity that effused from the completely trained, gigantic body, was thicker, heavier than any armor.

Sweeping his ice-blue hair that was trimmed very short, and of a similar color to his clothes, the owner of the voice grinned:

"Oh, little girl. You're more spirited than I imagined; that reassures me. Has your face gotten plumper?"

"... Oji-sama. It has been a long time."

Alice held back her tears with all her might, and saluted to the world's oldest, strongest swordsman — Integrity Knight Bercouli Synthesis One.

In the six years of Alice's life as an Integrity Knight, she had only opened up to one person, revered him as her mentor, and admired him as her father. At the same time,

she was sure that in this world, he was the only one — apart from Kirito — who she could not win against.

Therefore, she absolutely could not weep in front of him.

If Bercouli said that they could not keep Kirito here, she could only obey. Of course, the Alice now could not be forced by even Bercouli's orders. But, if she disobeyed in front of everyone else, it would disturb the order of the Knights and guards. In this situation in which they had but five days until the decisive battle, she absolutely could not harm Bercouli's leadership authority in any way.

As though he had seen completely seen through Alice's inner hesitation, Bercouli slowly walked over, the corners of his mouth maintaining a plain, gentle smile.

Gazing into Alice's eyes, he nodded forcefully.

Then, the Knight Commander suppressed Eldrie with a glance, who looked about to say something, and turned to look at Kirito, in Alice's arms.

Bercouli tightened his mouth. A light like bluish-white flames accumulated into those sharp eyes.

Bercouli inhaled a deep breath. Then, Alice felt the air around her swiftly becoming cold.

"...Oji-sama..."

Alice squeezed out a strained voice.

Bercouli was building up his aggressive energy. He was preparing to release one of the «Incarnation Techniques» only inheritable by Integrity Knights... The «Slash of Incarnation», a secret technique more powerful than the «Arm of Incarnation» that could move objects with the power of one's mind.

Imbuing his concentrated will into a sword, and releasing it. That invisible blade could sometimes parry the tangible blade of an enemy. The Armament Full Control Art of the Knight Commander's Divine Instrument, the «Time Piercing Sword» that could cut even the future, was a technique that first came into existence based on Bercouli's crushing willpower.

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In other words — did Bercouli plan to slice Kirito?

If he was literally going to finish the problem off, then that would be the only thing that Alice could absolutely not accept. If it came to that, Alice must draw her own sword to protect Kirito.

Suppressed by the Knight Commander's extremely crushing aggressive energy, no matter whether it was the surrounding soldiers, or Eldrie, or even the dragons under the tent, everyone sank into a deep silence. In the air compressed so tightly to the point of suffocation, Alice commanded her right hand fingers to move with all her might.

But, just as Alice touched her beloved sword's hilt, the corners of Bercouli's mouth twitched, and a telepathic sound came.

—It's okay, little girl.

"……?!"

In that instant when Alice held her breath.

Bercouli's body was completely still, but his two eyes flashed a terrifying light.

At the same time, in Alice's arms, Kirito's body jerked violently.

KIN! With a rough noise, the space between Bercouli and Kirito reverberated with a silver flash.

—This is?!

Alice gasped in shock, but Bercouli smiled jovially as though his aggressive energy just now was a fantasy.

"O…Oji-sama…?"

Turning towards the numbly mumbling Alice, the Knight Commander scratched his wide chin, the same as when they had practiced together before:

"Little girl, did you see that just now?"

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“Ye… Yes, I did. Even though it was just an instant… It appeared to be the flash of a sword clash…?”

“Yeah. I released not a Slash but a light Stab of Incarnation at that young man. If it had struck, it would probably have sliced a bit of skin off of his face.”

“If it… struck? Then that means…”

“Indeed, he stopped it. That young man used his own «Incarnation».”

Alice could not help but stared at the face of Kirito, supported by her left arm.

But, her expectations were shattered. In the slightly open black pupils, there was only empty darkness. No expression whatsoever, as always.

—But, his body did tremble, just now.

Alice soothed Kirito’s hair with her right hand, and looked at Bercouli. The Knight Commander shook his head slowly, and said assuredly:

“It seems like that young man’s heart is really not here… But, it isn’t dead. Listen, the young man was not trying to protect himself, but you, little girl. So, someday, he’ll be back. I think so. Perhaps, when you really need him, it’ll be the time, little girl.”

Alice could only blink back her tears more forcefully than before.

—Yes, he will definitely come back.

—Because Kirito… Kirito is the strongest swordsman in the world. He swung two swords and even killed that demi-immortal.

—Come back for me… is what I wouldn’t say. Come back, for the sake of the many people, living here in this world…

Alice could not resist anymore; she unhesitantly and tightly hugged Kirito. The didactic voice of the Knight Commander passed as if it were a hand comforting Alice, soothing her hack:

“So, Eldrie. Don’t say it so selfishly like that, just one more young man, take care of him..”

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“But…. But…”

The youngest Integrity Knight Eldrie expressed his opinions to the oldest Integrity Knight Bercouli with spirit that may said to be impressive.

“It would be acceptable if he had the least bit of strength, but in this state… Besides, even if he recovered, what can the sword of a student do…?”

“Hey, hey.”

With a calm smile, Bercouli’s words were as sharp as knives.

“Have you forgotten? This boy’s partner has won against even me. He’s beaten the Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli Synthesis One.”

Instantly, the entire grassy field was silent again.

“That kid called Eugeo… He’s strong, stronger than you can believe. I even used the Armament Full Control Art of my Time Piercing Sword. I still lost. As you, Deusolbert, and Fanatio did.”

Now, Eldrie was at a loss for words. Of course, a swordsman winning one-on-one against Bercouli, no matter among the Integrity Knights, or in the Dark Territory on the other side of that door, shouldn’t exist — everyone in the Axiom Church strongly believed this.

But, in a certain meaning, wasn’t this a declaration that was too dangerous?

Knight Commander Bercouli was able to lead the assembled guard with the authority of the strongest one. But, he made known the existence of a swordsman Eugeo whom he had been defeated by — and even approved that Eugeo and Kirito had equal strength, then…

As Alice thought up to this point, just as she was about to raise her head.

Bercouli suddenly looked to the sky with a spasm-like jerk.

“O…Oji-sama…?”

At Alice’s inquiry, the Knight Commander replied with unexpected words:

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"Somewhere far, far away, a wave of overwhelming fighting intent expanded in an instant, and disappeared… Someone I know, has died…"

4

The Ten Feudal Lords that formed the Dark Empire Ten Feudal Lord Meeting were completely different in personality, character, and hidden ambitions, but there was one aspect that they were all the same in.

That was their better understanding than anyone else of the one law that [Power dominates all].

It was better to say that this law was carved into them since youth, and through endless diligence — training themselves or eliminating non-conformists — they ultimately mounted the summit of this world that washed blood away with blood.

Therefore, when the other nine Feudal Lords, who stood in line with Dark General Shasta in the Throne Room, saw the rightmost Dark Knight draw his sword against the Emperor with sudden vigor, none of them felt surprised in their hearts.

In fact, most understood it as "Oh, you're brave enough to make a move here; you're pretty bold." Even the Elders of the Orcs and Ogres whose language skills and intelligence had deteriorated over three hundred years, thought "Now we can see this Emperor guy's power," flashing their beast-like eyes sharply. Even the young Fist Fighter Leader, who respectfully regarded Shasta as an equal who trained to better his own battle techniques, offered silent words of support: "Since you've pulled out your sword, slash the Emperor."

Within them, there were only two who predicted this situation seconds before it happened.

One of them was the Dark Sorceress Guild Leader, D.I.L. She harbored intense feelings of enmity towards Shasta; long since planning to kidnap the Dark General's lover, she had known Lipia's appearance for a long time.

Therefore, she was contrarily even more surprised when she saw Lipia's frozen head. Predicting that this would probably cause Shasta to explode in anger and draw his sword, D deliberated over what to do in that situation.

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Although she wanted to backstab Shasta and do the Emperor a favor to take advantage of him, D eventually chose to watch from the sidelines. If Shasta lost against the Emperor, then all would be well; if Shasta won, he would be deeply wounded, and then she would scorch her enemy and take over the Dark Empire herself. D chuckled silently as she suppressed her excitement by licking her lips.

But there was another person who had noticed the Dark General's intent of betrayal —

And now immediately took action.

***

With only the word "KILL" in his mind, Shasta violently swung his beloved sword.

If only the intensity of the «Incarnation» fused into the Slash was measured, it already clearly passed his strike while he crossed blades with Integrity Knight Bercouli. His rage and exclamation were so intense that the Armament Full Control Art, which would ordinarily require a prolix incantation, was immediately evoked.

Shasta's longsword «Hazy Mist» was a Divine Instrument-class Object automatically generated two hundred years ago in the Underworld as part of the VRMMO package. Its property was [Water]; now, reflecting Shasta's extremely strong murderous intent, the blade transformed into a mist-like shadow without losing its absolute killing power.

The special quality of the Hazy Mist in the state of Armament Full Control was to completely omit the attacking process of what all swords inherently held, [dealing damage by splitting or running through the target object with a sharp blade]. In the instant that one touched the long stream of mist, damage akin to a normal slash would be dealt to his Life. In other words, other than avoiding it, all forms of defense would be meaningless.

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In the instant that Shasta drew his sword, Gabriel Miller, as Emperor Vector, drew his own sword from his waist and was about to parry his opponent's attack.

If things continued like this, Shasta's mist blade would pass through Gabriel's sword, strike Gabriel's body, and inject all of the compressed killing intent.

However, as he was moved at lightning speed, right before he released the killing blow.

Shasta froze.

He did not know when, but under his left shoulder on the Dark General's heavy armor, within a joint of the thick plating, a throwing needle was stuck deeply there.

The one slowly standing up behind him was a ghostly thin figure entirely wrapped in a dark gray robe.

The Leader of the Assassin's Guild, Fer Za. The one hiding behind shadows who had the weakest existence among the ten Feudal Lords and uttered almost not a word during conferences. He glided forward, perhaps in the most striking way he ever had in his life.

Fer Za was able to notice Shasta's actions before everything happened only because he was the most cowardly and neurotic of the ten Feudal Lords.

The Assassin's Guild was actually a family where weaklings congregated. It was a group created for people who was born giftless in physicality, magic, wealth or other qualities, but rejecting a torturing, freedomless life of slavery, in order to hone the [Poison Technique] that was shunned even by the Dark Territory.

The poisonous Objects in the Underworld, such as a portion of insects, snakes, and plants, were originally configured as a part of the Load Tests. Therefore, their effects were restricted to the level that the inhabitants could easily recover if they used the required knowledge. Conversely speaking, there was virtually no way to obtain enough strength from it to confront Art rituals and swords.

However, the people who founded the Assassin's Guild invented the «condensation» technique unconceived even by «RATH» technicians, and over an immensely long

period of time, painstakingly produced and strengthened poison. The Assassin's Guild headquarters set deep under the slum streets of this castle-centered city even had a large cauldron that had been boiling the juice of poisonous fruits for a hundred years, and numerous pots that collected poisonous snakes from everywhere to make them cannibalize each other.

But the painstakingly completed [Lethal Toxin] instead brewed up a tragic internal strife, rampant with clandestine killings within the Guild. Different from Art rituals and all weapons, it was extremely difficult to search out the poisonous attacker since the poison's effects may be delayed.

Therefore, it was inevitable that the Guild leader would be unable to stay alive if he was not extremely paranoid. He must be able to notice the eyesight of those around him, no, even be able to feel an insignificant sliver of murderous intent hiding in the air.

To Fer Za, the killing intent released by Shasta once he saw Lipia's head was stronger than even the smell of blood.

And Dark General Shasta was the person whom Fer Za despised the most in the world.

The number of assassination plots he had planned and discarded until now was countless. He was confident that he could achieve the murder. However, if the cause of death was discovered to be poisoning, anyone would know it was the Assassin Guild's doing. An hour after Shasta's death, the immeasurably powerful Dark Knights would have attacked the Assassin's Guild headquarters and quickly kill them all. A direct battle would have no victor.

But, now, if it was in this instant.

He was in the right by piercing his enemy's body with well-sharpened poisonous darts. Because in the seconds that he drew his sword to take the Emperor's head, Shasta was no longer a Dark Knight, or a Feudal Lord; he was a mere traitor.

The things that Fer Za pulled out of his robes and threw were hidden weapons passed down through generations of leaders of the Assasin's Guild. They were

extremely thin metallic needles by the name of [Rubelir Toxic Steel], cut from a dangerous ore capable of secreting numbing toxin, and concealable in one's palm. After they were hollowed out, various poisons could be stored inside.

Stored inside was a lethal toxin, a collection of the essence of the Assassin Guild's techniques. Gathering rare parasites by the name of [Blood Corroding Leeches], crushing fifty thousand of them together, and a number of condensations and filtrations would yield only a single drop of the poisonous liquid. Since all attempts to breed and raise this type of leech had failed, just the task of creating one drop of poisonous liquid would require an extremely high effort.

Of course, one thing that Fer Za could not possibly know was that every moving creature in the Underworld were all generated by the system according to specified values per each area unit; other than livestock Units, such as sheep and cows, all other artificial breeding was impossible.

In other words, the poisonous needle that Fer Za released was concentrated with all of the power of the Assassin's Guild from the material used to the poisonous liquid inside. Simultaneously, they could also be described as the crystallization of the resentment of the weak who had suffered hundreds of years of abuse.

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As Shasta had concentrated all of his willpower onto his swinging sword, he almost failed to notice the pain of a metallic needle piercing deeply into his body.

But in the instant that he prepared to jump high towards the Throne, his entire body became as heavy as lead, and he suddenly widened his eyes.

His feet lost their strength; as he dropped to one knee with a **crack**, he finally felt a foreign object in his left abdomen.

— Poison?

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After a split-second thought, before an ice-like numbness spread to his left hand, he quickly pulled out the needle. As Shasta realized that this small, toy-like weapon was gleaming a brilliant green, he quickly understood that it was the accursed Rubelir Toxic Steel and immediately began chanting a counter-Art.

However, travelling at a terrifying speed, the coldness spread to his entire body from his left abdomen, quickly reaching his mouth. His tongue lost all feeling before he could finish just the activation command [**System Call**]; he could not even clench his teeth.

His left hand was also paralyzed; the poisonous needle made a slight sound as it slipped out of his hand and dropped onto the black marble floor.

Finally, his right hand that was holding his longsword high also began to drop slowly, and at the same time the longsword's Release Recollection state was also lifted: the blade transformed from gray mist back into its tangible form and its tip touched the floor.

He was frozen to exactly the same pose as he was before he drew his sword: left knee on the floor with his head bowed. The black lap of a robe silently appeared in Shasta's vision.

— *Fer Za.*

— *I didn't expect to be ambushed by this guy.*

"... You're definitely thinking... 'How could I lose to this unmentionable little thing', aren't you, Biksul."

Hearing a scratchy sound from above, Shasta could only move his eyes and put on a severe expression.

— *What makes a guy like you address me with such familiarity...?*

"You want to say that I don't have a good reason to call you by your name, right? But, it's definitely not the first time I've called you Biksul, you know?"

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Slowly coiling his robes on the floor and kneeling down to the same height, the Assassin's face took up the majority of Shasta's vision. But a deep hood completely obscured the light and all was shrouded in darkness except for his protruding chin.

The chin moved as if it was trembling, and an even scratchier voice flowed out of the darkness.

"You… don't remember, do you? The faces of many kids whom you completely defeated in the Youth School, and one of them who could not bear the humiliation, jumped into a water ditch, disappeared from the school forever."

— What? What is this man saying? The Youth School?

As the son born of a nameless Knight, Shasta was shut into a Youth School affiliated with the Dark Knights from the moment when he could grasp a wooden sword, regardless of whether he agreed or not. From then on, what remained in his memory was the day-to-day training that his life depended on. He won practically every selection test; when he caught his breath he had already been appointed as an Officer of the Dark Knights, selected by his mentor, the former Knight Commander — that was half of his torrential life, devoid of any opportunity to look back upon it.

Of course, he had no way of remembering the kids whom he had swung wooden swords with together thirty years ago.

"…But, I forgot not a single day, you know. From the time when I floated to the underground culvert, picked up by the Assassin's Guild, in the eternity during which I was freely ordered around as a slave, I've always remembered… I built up my knowledge, invented many new poisons, and eventually became the leader of the Guild. As the price to pay, I lost so much… But all of it was for vengeance, Biksul."

At the same as the contorted voice broke off, the hood tilted slightly, and Fer Za exposed his face in front of Shasta's eyes.

He still could not remember. No, even if Shasta could completely remember his former classmates, he would not have recalled this man's name, because, perhaps due to some unknown effects of the poison, Fer Za's face was severely deteriorated, into a form so bizarre that even an Orc would be frightened.

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Within the hood that was pulled down again, there were only two eyes flashing an intense light.

"The poison now injected into your body is developed specifically to kill you, collected drop by drop, spending time on it long enough to drive one crazy. According to my experiments, it can even kill a large-type Ground Dragon with a Life higher than 30,000 in under an hour. With your Life, I'm afraid there are only two or three minutes left. So… It's time for payback. My hatred and humiliation that I imbued onto you."

— Hatred, huh?

Shasta moved his eyes away from Fer Za and stared at the poisonous needle lying on the black marble floor.

— I was driven by rage and hatred to murder the Emperor. Fer Za injected this weapon with exactly the same strength to kill me. Therefore, my Slash stopped. The «Incarnation of Slaughter» cannot win against the «Incarnation of Righteousness». Before, the sword technique I mastered when I crossed swords with that man… Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli; in the last critical moment, I still forgot it all…

Unable to support even his position with one knee against the ground, Shasta fell to the left and slid onto the floor.

In the middle of his blurred vision, at where the needle pointed—

There was the cube of ice inside the silver bowl.

***

Fer Za, the avenger originally named Ferrius Zalgatis, opened his eyes wide, as if he was savoring the instance of joy he had worked so hard for.

Dark General Shasta, who had been playing with glory, was now lying under Fer Za's feet. His skin, tough for his age, had turned the color of dirt; his sharp gaze was fading away, and his breath was close to stopping.

What an ugly and pitiful way of dying.

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Yet Shasta's death also proved the superiority of Poisoning Techniques over swordsmanship and Dark Sorcery. With this new kind of complex poison made out of Rubelir Toxic Steel and Blood Corroding Leeches, just one needle would not only forcefully prevent the enemies from drawing swords or chanting Arts, but also induce their rapid death.

After seeing this sight, the Emperor on the Throne would also realize how valuable the Assassin's Guild was. When mass-production of the new poison was complete, there would be no more need to please the Knights and Sorcerers. He could redeem his name, return to the Zalgatis Clan that disowned him, and take over the family as a new dictator…

Fer Za, whose entire body shook as he was intoxicated in the zenith of exuberance, completely overlooked the fact that outside his field of vision, the blade of Shasta's sword was slowly melting back into mist.

***

— Lipia.

Before his Life ran out, Shasta called out within his heart the name of the only woman he ever loved.

Lipia must have decided to assassinate the Emperor because she was desperate in realizing the arrival of the new age that she had heard from Shasta. Because she believed, as soon as the war of three hundred years ended and new laws and regulations were allowed to shine upon the Dark Empire, then the orphans, even those who would either starve to death or become temporary slaves would gain the privilege to live happy lives.

— Fer Za.

— You were defeated in the Youth School? You couldn't swallow the loss, so you wanted to end yourself?

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— But, at least you had your opportunity. You had parents who paid your tuition, three meals every day, a warm bed and a shelter from the rain. In this world, how many more young lives had their lowest privileges stripped from them at birth, used like they were trash, and disappeared?

— For this world, Lipia risked her life to correct it. I won't let her Incarnation be in vain. Your pathetic little personal hatred will be———

"…**OUT OF MY WAY!!**"

Shasta's mouth, which was supposed to be completely numb, let out a terrifying roar; at the same time, a gray tornado spun high in the air from the Dark Knight's right hand.

This was Releasing Recollection of a Divine Instrument, only usable by a few within even the Integrity Knights. Shasta's indomitable Incarnation began to directly rewrite the Main Visualizer that stored and calculated all information of the entire Underworld.

The gray tornado already became type-less, pure destructive power that broke down everything it touched. With no time to evade, Fer Za's thick black robe was surrounded by the tornado; with a dry noise, it was reduced to a cloud of dust and dispersed.

The stark naked middle-aged man who was thin as a twig threw up his hands to cover his deteriorated face. But, his hands were quickly broken into countless pieces of flesh and blown around — then, his entire body became a thick mist of blood, swirling around in the air.

***

In the instant that the strange tornado rose from dying Dark General, the strongest Dark Sorceress D.I.L. had an extremely bad feeling, and with both hands, generated Wind Elements and flew backward at full speed.

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But, as she saw that the tornado had touched her right leg, and that everything below her knee had vanished without a trace, that chilling feeling became the greatest shock she had ever felt in her life.

Even when D was bathing or sleeping, she was protected by dozens of Defensive Arts. Apart from magical attacks, these Defensive Arts constituted an iron defense that was able to repel all forms of attack, such as projectile weapons, swords, and poisons.

Of course, if the equal Priority ten Feudal Lords all attacked with maximum strength, there would be a chance of running through the shield and harming her skin. However, directly slicing away her physical body and Life just by touching it as if the shield did not exist, was impossible. Absolutely impossible.

But, no matter how she denied it in her head, she still saw the deadly tornado bearing her down faster than her flying retreat, heavily impeding her right foot. A Sorceress like D could completely revive herself with Healing Arts no matter the extent of damage to her physical body, but only under the condition that she was still alive.

"Hiih… AAH….!!"

Finally, a shrill scream came from D's mouth.

But her voice was immediately drowned out by the shrieks of the two scrambling Goblin Elders.

The Mountain Goblin Elder Hagasi and Plains Goblin Elder Kubiri, who had been kneeling at D's left, ran for their lives on their short legs, wanting to escape the tornado. But it was impossible to evade the expansion of the tornado that could even overtake D, who was flying at top speed.

"**Kugyaaaaaah!!**"

With a grotesque noise, Hagasi slipped and fell onto the floor. He desperately stuck out his left hand and grabbed Kubiri's ankle with a viselike grip.

"Higyaaah! Leggo!! Le—!!"

CRUNCH.

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The two Goblin leaders were effortlessly melted into blood mist and dispersed.

CRACK.

D's right leg was blown away at the hip joint without leaving a trace.

Her beauty severely distorted by horror and despair, the Leader of the Dark Sorceresses watched as — the expansion of the tornado miraculously stopped.

Shasta's collapsed body was no longer visible. Around there, the diameter and height of the erected obconic storm had already swelled to about twenty Mel. The other six Feudal Lords, who were further away, speedily retreated to the western wall, and the officers of the ten armies lined up south of the Hall closely avoided injury.

Among her extremely chaotic thoughts, with her outstanding reasoning, D deduced the reason that the tornado's expansion stopped.

To protect the ten or so higher level Dark Knights. In other words, that tornado was created from Shasta's willpower after all.

As though it were proving this theory, the upper half of the tornado slowly changed shape.

What appeared was the translucent upper body of a colossal man, made out of mist.

Although it was huge, that was undoubtedly the shadow of Dark General Shasta.

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As Emperor Vector, Gabriel Miller couldn't help but watch the erected tornado giant with an expression that looked like surprise.

Publicly displaying the female assassin's head,; the leftmost Knight drew his sword as soon as he saw it — everything was exactly the same as predicted up until there. To the man who wanted to slice towards Gabriel, the elder of the Assassin's Guild used numbing poison or something to stop him; that didn't seem out of the ordinary, either.

Although it was different from his plan of beheading the traitor in one stroke and drive absolute loyalty into the nine remaining Units, a voluntary action to protect the Emperor could be judged as subservient.

It was because of this thought that he still sat and observed the progression of events—

But a gray tornado suddenly spun up from the fallen body of the Traitor Unit, and the Elder of the Assassin's Guild who was surrounded by it and the two Goblin generals were destroyed in an instant; even Gabriel could not help but halt his thoughts.

The General Units were supposed to be of the same level. Then, if they were to fight each other, it would supposedly be the same as duels in real-world VRMMOs: if someone's HP dropped, it would heal back.

But now, how was it possible that three Units were demolished in mere seconds? Could it be that there were systems or theories he himself did not understand in this «Underworld»?

Just as he was thinking, the tornado giant opened its mouth and let out an earth-shaking roar.

Under the intense pressure, most of the glass windows decorating the Throne Room shattered in all directions.

The giant slowly clenched its frozen right fist—

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And brought it down crashing down towards Gabriel.

Gabriel realized instantly that neither drawing his sword nor evading would have any effect. Glancing left in his vision, he saw adjutant Vassago simply raise and leap out of the way; Gabriel remained on the throne, quietly waiting for the gray fist that came smashing towards him.

***

The Tornado of Death that was released because of Shasta's Incarnation before he died was a phenomenon exceeding the estimates of the Underworld system.

It was not measured attack power that decreased Fer Za's Life and caused his death; [The Will to Die] was directly sent into the Light Cube: it first destroyed the Fluctlight and performed an inverse calculation, shattering the visual physical body.

Therefore, the attack on Gabriel, or Emperor Vector, did not affect his Life.

But, the murderous intent created in Shasta's Light Cube was transmitted by the photon communication circuit to the STL that Gabriel was using—

The fatal willpower of the one called Dark General Shasta that only a handful of swordsmen in the Underworld could produce directly struck Gabriel Miller's Fluctlight core — his «Self-Image».

At this time, Shasta felt that he had already completely melded with the full-body strike that he had released, and shot into Emperor Vector.

Suffice to say, the Life of his original body had already been exhausted. As described, this was the last sword of Shasta's life.

His only regret was that he could not see Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli once again. But, that man would definitely understand. The Dark General's wishes, and why he killed the Emperor.

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Including the Assassin's Guild Leader Fer Za, the two Goblin Elders, the most bellicose of the Ten Feudal Lords, had already died. It was very regrettable that the Dark Sorceress Leader D had escaped, but it would be impossible to rebirth with a severe injury like that. Along with the Dark Knight Commander, if even the Emperor died, the remaining Feudal Lords wouldn't easily wage war against the Integrity Knights.

If only an armistice, even a temporary one, could be established with the Human World inhabitants who had also lost their ruler, so that they could talk to teach other and understand each other without drawing swords.

Hopefully from now on — the peaceful world that Lipia longed for can arrive.

Fused with his Incarnation, Shasta ran through Emperor Vector's forehead and entered the soul core within.

If only that was destroyed, even if Vector was the God of Darkness, he would definitely and completely perish like Fer Za.

With a silent scream, Shasta's will collided with the Emperor's soul—

Then, he experienced the last shock of his life.

Nothing.

The soul core like a cloud of light, a place supposed to be filled with the essence of vitality, had only deep, deep darkness.

Why? Even the soul of the recluse Fer Za shined brightly, dedicated to life to the point of greed.

Shasta's Incarnation was swallowed by the endlessly extending [Darkness] within the Emperor.

It disappeared, then evaporated.

— This person, this man…

— Does he not understand what life is?

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A shining man who has no knowledge of life, a soul, or love. That's why it's hungry. That's why it thirsts for the souls of others.

No matter with how strong of an Incarnation, «The Sword of Murderous Intent» cannot kill this man.

Because this man's soul has ceased to live.

It must be communicated. To whom? The person who will definitely fight this monster in the near future.

Whom — To whom…

But at this time, Shasta's consciousness was covered by a bottomless abyss.

… Remorse…

… Lipia…

After the two thoughts frayed apart, the soul of Dark General Biksul Ul Shasta was completely destroyed.

***

When he was pierced by the overly intense light of a soul, Gabriel Miller was more joyful than frightened.

The Dark Knight's soul was filled with thicker emotion than the soul of the female assassin he consumed two days ago. Love for that woman — and an incomprehensible substance equivalent to kindness, more widely known. Also, the strong killing intent that was driven by this.

Love and hatred. Is there anything more delicious in the world?

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At this time, Gabriel was completely unaware that he had exposed his own life to danger. Seeing three Units blown to pieces because Dark Knight's attack, Gabriel thirsted more to swallow the Knight's soul than to care about his own safety.

If Gabriel had fought for survival because of fear of the Knight's attack, Shasta's murderous intent would have traveled through the STL, destroyed Gabriel's survival instinct, and blown everything away along with his Fluctlight.

But Gabriel Miller was a person who [did not understand life]. To him, including himself, all life was merely automatic machines the same as the many bugs he had killed when he was young. Gabriel's actual wish was unlocking the [soul] that was the energy source of these machines — the secrets of the mysterious shining cloud.

Therefore, the destroy signal created by Shasta's Fluctlight simply floated past the extended emptiness within Gabriel's Fluctlight and disappeared without any collisions whatsoever.

Gabriel could not have known this theory, but as he chewed the Knight's soul, he understood two matters:

Firstly, in this world, there existed an attack method without weapons or incantations like normal VRMMO games.

Secondly, this attack method seemed to have no effect on him.

Later, he should get Critter to investigate the theory behind the phenomenon just now. As he thought this, Gabriel slowly stood from his throne.

***

The surviving six Feudal Lords — Dark Sorceress Guild Leader D.I.L., Fist Fighter Leader Iskahn, Commerce Guild Leader Langel, Giant Tribal Chief Siglosig, Orc Tribal Chief Lilpin and Ogre Tribal Chief Filgul — stared stupidly up at Emperor Vector's figure; some with their backs against the wall, some with their behinds on the ground, some tending to other's wounds.

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All that remained in everyone's heart was fear.

Dark General Shasta's terrifying super attack — a ghastly attack that instantly sliced three Generals to pieces and blew away the right foot of D, who was seen as the strongest among the ten Feudal Lords, harmed not a hair on the Emperor who took it head on.

Power dominates all.

Everyone deeply believed that Emperor Vector possessed power far insurmountable by the six Feudal Lords and the hundred officers awaiting orders behind them, combined.

Like a rippling wave, all knelt down and submitted themselves before the Emperor. Even the Dark Knights who had their beloved Knight Commander killed were no exception.

From above their heads, the Emperor's voice reverberated.

"… Troops who have lost their generals are immediately commanded by the next highest ranking officer. An hour from now, we shall advance as planned."

Words devoid of anger or denunciation towards the betrayal. This further provoked deeper terror within the general's hearts.

D, who had painstakingly stopped the bleeding on her right foot, raised her right hand and fingers high in the air, and shouted:

"**Long live His Majesty the Emperor!!**"

Then—

Overlapping voices cheering for the Emperor shook the entire city.

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Alice looked around the interior of a camp tent prepared for herself, and sighed softly.

A simple bedsheet was pulled straight, without a single wrinkle. The cashmere leather laid on the ground was also brand new, and the air had only a dry sunlit smell. There were no problems with these, but at the same time it signified that this tent was not hurriedly vacated for Alice. In other words, Knight Commander Bercouli had believed all along that Alice would join the battle, and specifically prepared an extra tent for a Knight.

Although this proved that she was trusted, it would be better to say that man had thought of her own plans.

No — that's unlikely. Even if he was the Knight Commander, there was no way that he could expect Alice to bring Kirito along. There was only one simple bedsheet set up in the tent.

Alice softly hugged the black-haired youth's waist, guided him to the bed, turned him around and sat him down. Suddenly, a thin noise came from the boy's throat, and he attempted to extend his left hand.

"Okay, wait here for just a moment."

Dashing to the luggage set in front of the tent entrance, Alice pulled out two black and white longswords. She returned beside the bed and placed them onto Kirito's knees. Then, Kirito tightly hugged the swords with his only hand, and fell silent.

Slowly caressing the bowed black head, Alice softly bit her lip and became lost in thought.

Although she boasted to Eldrie that she was going to carry Kirito to battle, in reality, it would be a little difficult. There would be no problem if it was only a skinny Kirito, but if she were to bring along the super heavy «Night Sky Sword» and «Blue Rose Sword», her movements would definitely be restricted.

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Although she considered directly sitting on Amayori's saddle, if the enemy had Dark Knights who could fly, there would possibly be an aerial fight.

Although it would be very regrettable, entrusting Kirito to the supply squad after battle broke out would be the most realistic plan.

Her old friends, the Integrity Knights would definitely go for the front line, and she didn't know a single one from the soldiers made up of normal citizens. But now she felt uncomfortable to request Eldrie to introduce to her someone suitable for the job.

"Kirito…"

Alice knelt down, scanning the boy's face, and clasped his cheeks between her hands.

She had never thought of Kirito as a burden. Once he regained his heart, this youth will become a swordsman stronger than anyone in the garrison army. She brought him to the battlefield to find all possible ways of regaining his awareness.

Knight Commander Bercouli said before that Kirito had deflected his «Slash of Incarnation». That was because he wished to protect Alice.

Was it really believable?

When she first met him at the Sword Mastery Academy, he was an arrestee and a criminal. Then when they met again on the eightieth floor of the Cathedral, he was a sentenced man and a traitor. Then in the instant when they had their last conversation on the highest floor of the Cathedral, no matter how much their relationship improved, it was only in a truce.

—You've clearly lost your own heart ever since that battle, so why did you still protect me from Uncle's aggression?

—In the end… Who am I to you?

This question bumped into Kirito's sightless gaze and bounced back.

Then, how did she herself see this boy?

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If she were to use one phrase to describe the Kirito in the Cathedral, "hateful" would probably be the most appropriate. He was just a boy endlessly ranting about how Alice Synthesis Thirty was an [idiot].

But, in the last nettle, the shadow of the Kirito confronting the Highest Minister Administrator—

Seeing the tail of the fiercely blowing black coat and the figure with both hands gripping swords, Alice felt her heart quake. Such an intensity, but a pang as though she were stabbed.

The feeling from then had always been throbbing faintly deep within her heart.

—Because I am an artificial existence. A puppet existing only for battle, always occupying Alice Schuberg's body. I am not allowed at all to revel in emotions other than belligerence.

However. What if.

Because I keep suppressing my own heart, I am unable to communicate my voice to you?

If, right now, I release all of my «Incarnation» to you, will you respond to me?

Alice inhaled a deep breath, and held it.

The cheeks clasped between her hands were very cold. No, it was her palms that were hot.

Slowly, slowly approaching his face. She tilted her head slightly, and her hair fell onto her face.

From the extremely close distance, staring into the stars within his pupils, she gradually brought her face closer—

Suddenly a bell sounded clearly with a [**Riiing**], and Alice recoiled in alarm.

She frantically looked around, but there was not a soul in the tent. Then she realized that the source of the noise was the bell set onto the knocker at the tent entrance.

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A guest. Intentionally clearing her throat and pushing her hair behind her back, Alice quickly traversed the tent.

It must be Eldrie come to convince her yet again. This time, she must make herself clear that she will not yield, no matter what he says.

Alice peeled back one of the double layer inner curtains, slid inside, and opened the thick outer fur with her left hand.

Then, her half-open lips stopped instantly.

The visitor before her was not an Integrity Knight; not even a normal soldier. She couldn't help but blink in surprise.

"T-This…"

With a small, timid voice, the visitor held out a covered pot held with both hands.

"I've… I've come to deliver your dinner, Knight-sama."

"…Is that so."

Alice glanced up. Sure enough, the crimson light of the sunset was already gradually sinking below the mountains.

"Thank you… You've worked hard."

Alice commended as she received the pot, and looked the small frame up and down again.

She was still quite young, seeming to be a young girl of about fifteen or sixteen.

Beautiful red hair hung below her shoulders. Her large eyes were of the same reddish leafy color. Her fair white skin and high nose signified that she was of Northern Empire lineage.

She wore the simple light armor of a lower guard, but underneath were a gray tunic dress and skirt; it should be a school uniform.

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Taking a child like this to the battlefield… Alice knit her brows, and suddenly thought of something.

She seemed to have seen this girl's appearance somewhere. But the Alice living in the Cathedral then shouldn't have had the opportunity to meet common citizens.

At this time, another girl who seemed to hide behind the red-haired girl shyly stepped forward.

"Th-this… is bread, and stuff to drink…"

Alice couldn't help but smile slightly at the barely audible voice of the girl whose tea-colored hair was close to black, and took the offered basket.

"There's no need to be so scared, I'm not going to eat you."

Just as she was saying that, Alice finally remembered.

She had once heard this extremely nervous voice. These two are from then…?

"May I ask… Could both of you be from… North Centoria Sword Mastery Academy…?"

At this, the girls' stiff expressions instantly soothed in relief. But then they immediately straightened their figures, snapped their legs together and reported their names:

"Y-yes! I… I am of the Human Empire Garrison Army Supply Division, Novice Trainee Tiese Shtolienen!"

"I am of the s-same division, Novice Trainee Ronye Arabel!"

As expected, Alice thought, and reflexively saluted back.

These are the two who came forward to beg to bid farewell to Kirito and Eugeo when I took them away from the Academy.

No matter how lacking the Garrison Army was in terms of manpower, it would never expropriate students. Therefore, these two voluntarily left the familiarity of the

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Central Capital to come to the Eastern border. Why would these childlike girls do this to such a degree…?

Her right hand holding the pot, left hand holding the basket, Alice couldn't help but stare at the duo. Seeing this, the black-brown-haired girl called Ronye hid behind the red-haired girl's back again. The red-haired girl called Tiese curled up tightly, but finally opened her mouth with a desperate expression:

"I… I… K-Knight-sama… I also well know that t-this is a highly disrespectful act…"

Alice could not help but smile wryly at this extremely exaggerated wording; she squeezed out a soft smile and interrupted her:

"Didn't I say that there's no need for that kind of formality? In this camp, I'm just a swordswoman gathered here to protect the Human Empire. Just call me Alice, Tiese-san, and… Ronye-san."

Right after her words, Tiese and Ronye who stuck her head out from behind both gaped.

"…W-what's the matter?"

"Ah, no… It's just…. Comparing from before, when we met at the Academy, our impressions of you are completely different…"

"Real…ly?"

Alice tilted her head as she thought about that. She felt nothing about it herself, but possibly, in the half-year she had spent at Rulid, she changed a bit without knowing it. The Knight Commander had also said something completely unfounded about her face getting plumper.

But now that she thought about it, Selka's cooking was simply too delicious, and she couldn't deny that she did eat more than normal… But it shouldn't be to the degree that it showed on the surface…

A smile floating onto her slightly tightened face, Alice continued:

"Then… Is there anything you want to talk to me about?"

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"Ah… Y-yes, there is."

Tiese relaxed her nervous demeanor slightly, sucked her lip and said:

"It's… We've heard tell that when Knight-sa… Alice-sama came on a dragon, you brought a young black-haired male… So we guessed… That he… Could be… Someone we know…"

"Ah… So it's like this, indeed."

Finally understanding the girls' reason for visiting, Alice nodded.

"You both were on good terms with Kirito in the Academy, weren't you…?"

Right after Alice's words, the two instantly shined like blooming flower buds. Ronye even leaked tears slightly from her tea-colored eyes.

"As expected… It's Kirito-senpai…"

Tiese held Ronye's hand as she murmured, and shouted, full of hope:

"Then… Eugeo-senpai also…!"

Hearing this name, Alice sharply inhaled a breath of cold air.

These two naturally don't know. The night-and-day fight and ending that unfolded in the Cathedral. They had no way of knowing. Everything, including the death of the Highest Minister Administrator who died inside, was known only by the Integrity Knights.

Seeing Alice not utter a sound, the two revealed strange expressions. Alice looked from Tiese's and Ronye's eyes for a few seconds, and slowly looked down.

Everything has gone this far; she couldn't hide anything now.

Besides, these two have the right to know. Perhaps they volunteered to become Garrison soldiers and come here to see Kirito and Eugeo again…

Alice lifted her head decidedly and slowly opened her mouth:

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"To both of you, this may be too cruel of a reality… But I believe, as the underclassmen of Kirito and Eugeo, you will definitely accept this."

Then she stepped back, lifted the fur drapery, and urged the two inside the tent.

Contradictory to Alice's expectations deep down, Kirito saw Tiese and Ronye, but displayed not a flutter in reaction.

Enduring her disappointment, Alice stood on the side of the tent, gazing at the tragic scene in front of her.

Dropping to her knees in front of Kirito sitting on the bed, Ronye took Kirito's left hand in both of her own small hands as tears slid down her cheeks.

But what was more painful was Tiese, who fell onto the fur carpet, staring at the Blue Rose Sword. Her paper-white face lost all expression as she received the news of Eugeo's death. Wordlessly, she turned her eyes to the blade, which was snapped in the middle.

Alice had nearly no opportunity to directly speak with the young man called Eugeo.

When she took him into the Cathedral and locked him into the dungeon, and when she engaged them on the eightieth floor of the Tower, leaving only when she fought alongside with him in the final battle on the highest floor against Administrator.

Not only winning against Knight Commander Bercouli, he had transformed his own body into a sword, destroyed the Sword Golem and sliced off one of the Highest Minister's arms; Alice felt deep respect for his willpower from the bottom of her heart, but his personal disposition was something she had heard mostly about from Selka.

According to Selka, Eugeo was a mature yet thoughtful young man. He was often forcefully dragged along by his childhood friend Alice Schuberg on all different kinds of adventures. That kind of personality must be a good partner to Kirito.

Kirito and Eugeo must have created a lot of disturbances in the Academy as well. Yet these two girls were drawn to them, and deeply affected. Just like how Alice was.

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—Therefore, please, I beg you both to endure this pain. Kirito and Eugeo fought for many important things, and were injured and lost their souls and lives.

Alice prayed within her heart as she gazed towards the two.

When they are subjected to an overly great frightening or melancholy psychological impact, the people living in the Human Empire often develop mental diseases since they cannot bear it. Some time ago, Rulid, invaded by the Dark Army, also produced a few villagers who had no physical injury yet were confined to their beds.

Tiese must love Eugeo deeply.

At such a young age, having to endure the immense impact of the death of a loved one was absolutely no easy task.

In front of Alice's sight, Tiese, sitting paralyzed on the ground, twitched her finger, inching towards the blade of the Blue Rose Sword.

Alice anxiously watched Tiese's every move. Although the Blue Rose Sword was snapped in half, it was ultimately a Divine Instrument of the highest level. Although she did not think that girl would be able to wield it, overly deep despair and pain could possibly lead to unexpected strength. No one knows what will happen.

Tiese extended a trembling finger, finally touching the light blue blade. She gently traced not the blade itself, but the side, which was ground to a smooth surface.

Then, in that instant—

Red light that shot into the tent via the skylight spread around; Alice saw a weak, but surely flashing blue light emanating from the broken blade.

At the same time, Tiese's entire body shook violently.

Feeling something, Ronye turned to look at her friend. In the nervous air, large droplets appeared in Tiese's eyes and fell soundlessly.

"... Just now..."

A whisper came from her lightly colored lips.

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"… I heard it… Eugeo-senpai's… voice… He said, don't cry… Because I'm… always… here… He said that…"

As the pooling tears became more and more, suddenly, Tiese laid her face onto the sword and began sobbing loudly like a child. Ronye laid onto Kirito's knees, wailing.

Alice was so moved by the indescribably poignant scene that she too was about to cry—

But in a certain corner of her mind, she repeatedly thought about whether this kind of thing could really happen.

Although Alice did not hear Eugeo's voice, there was an unmistakable instant when the sword released light. Then, the words that Tiese heard could not be completely dismissed as hallucinations.

On the Blue Rose Sword, there still remained something that was the same as Eugeo's soul… Was it like that?

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When Alice released the Armament Full Control Art, she also felt that the Fragrant Olive Sword seemingly fused with her own consciousness. Eugeo's situation was not only the same as hers, he actually fused his own body with the Blue Rose Sword, and was fatally wounded in the process.

Therefore, the idea that the remaining sword fragments could still have the owner's soul may actually be possible.

But, Tiese just said that Eugeo called upon her. If this was the truth, then what remained in that sword was not the reverberations of a soul, but the actual consciousness — or Incarnation.

A hallucination caused by the girl's desire? Or…?

This was frustrating. If it was Kirito, he would immediately see through the secret of this phenomenon. After all, he was from outside this world, dropped from where the mysterious Gods live.

Among her chaotic thoughts, like a small bubble, a phrase floated into Alice's mind.

World End Altar.

That unfamiliarly named place seemed as though it had a way to the outer world.

If they were able to get there, would all of the mysteries instantly come to light? They might even take back Kirito's lost consciousness, wouldn't they?

But, the ***Altar*** was outside the Human Empire, on the other side south of the Great Eastern Gate. In other words, the border of the ***Dark Territory***, ruled by the Dark Races.

If they wanted to go there, first, they must not only defend against the army array beyond the Great Eastern Gate, they must penetrate it. No, even if they could penetrate the enemy army, they can't just leave the Gate defenses behind and run to the south. As an Integrity Knight bestowed with overpowering strength, Alice carried the duty of protecting the Human Empire.

She should just use herself to lure away the entire enemy army and lead them far away from the Gate while heading for the ***Altar***. But, to the people of the Dark

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Territory, invading the Human Empire has been their wish for hundreds of years. There cannot be something more tantalizing than that…

It seems that if they want to target the World End Altar, they must completely annihilate the Dark Army in front of them first.

At this conclusion, Alice could not help but close her eyes.

Although she came up with an exaggerated solution like annihilating the enemy, at the current situation, simply repelling the enemy vanguard first will be extremely difficult. However, she could only do that. Even if it is for Tiese and Ronye's protection, and that of Kirito.

Sighing softly, Alice interrupted these seconds-long thoughts, and walked towards the two ceaselesly wailing girls.

6

Solus's sunset had long disappeared into the east, but within the sky of the Dark Territory, which appeared narrow beyond the Great Eastern Gate, an ominous blood-red still shook steadily.

As though they wanted to obscure that sight; white tents were erected towards both north and south at the center of the the Human Empire Defense Army camp, in the grassy plains that served as Dragon landing sites during the day. Under an Axiom Church flag flying high within, there gathered a total of thirty Integrity Knights and Defense Army Commanders, their faces all plastered with solemn expressions.

Alice realized that the Knights and soldiers had not separated at all; she halted her footsteps in slight surprise.

The Integrity Knights were clad in shining silver armor and the soldier commanders in black iron armor that lacked splendor, but still had a high Priority; both sides were engaged in enthusiastic discussion, clutching cups filled with Siral water. As she listened in, she found that the soldiers' words had already lost all traces of convoluted honorifics.

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"Although it's a makeshift regiment, it's still pretty good, isn't it, little girl?"

A low voice suddenly came from her side; Alice turned frantically.

Knight Commander Bercouli, with both arms crossed over his Oriental-styled clothing, stopped Alice who was about to salute, and continued:

"In this Defense Army, everything related to the stupid formalities and stuff has been revoked. Luckily, there's no term in the Taboo Index that says that [Normal citizens must perfectly greet a Knight before talking to him]."

"Ha, haah… I also think that's really unnecessary, but let's put that aside right now…"

Alice turned her eyes back to the army meeting.

"— Where are the other Integrity Knights? As far as I can see, there are only ten over there."

"Very unfortunately, this is everyone."

"Eh… EH?!"

Alice could not help but hold up a hand to cover her high voice, and looked up at the Knight Commander, who had a slightly bitter look on his face.

"How… Can this be? Including myself, there should be thirty-one of us Integrity Knights."

This was the same as **Thirty-One**, Eldrie's given name in the Sacred Tongue.

Bercouli's reply was mixed with a low "Even though you say that" sigh:

"You know as well as I do, little girl. About the «Reprocessing» setting that Chief Elder Chudelkin administered that caused memory discordance in the Knights. Since that guy died, the seven Knights who were still in Reprocessing in the Senate have still not awoken."

"…!"

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Alice could not help but widen her eyes. Bercouli continued in an even more dejected voice:

"The only ones who knew the incantation for Reprocessing were Chudelkin and the Highest Minister. They're both dead now, it's impossible to wake those seven up without spending time to decipher the incantation, and there's no time for that now. There's only one Knight who is not in Reprocessing but in stasis; if we can think of a way to wake that guy up…"

Alice felt that the Knight Commander's words were mumbled, so she asked:

"May I ask who this is, that single individual?"

"… It's the «Silent» Zayta."

"……!"

Although she had never directly seen this person and had heard only a few rumored names, Alice still held her breath. The reason was that those rumors were simply too chilling.

Bercouli coughed, hinting that they should discuss these matters another time. Then, he continued his explanation:

"…In summary, there are only twenty-four awakened Integrity Knights as of now. Four of them have stayed in the Cathedral and Central Capital for management, and four of them are acting guards at the Mountain Range at the Edge. The remaining sixteen… This is the extent of what we can put into this line of absolute defense. Of course, that's counting myself and you, little girl."

"Sixteen…?"

Alice wanted to add "only", but bit her lip and resisted.

If they confirmed their situation again, half of the fourteen in the strategy meeting all lacked Divine Instrument — that is, they were lower Knights incapable of invoking the Armament Full Control Art. Even if they just considered close combat, they were warriors capable of slaying one or two hundred Goblins, but they couldn't be expected to have the explosive power to stabilize the battlefield.

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To Alice who fell silent, Bercouli changed his tone of voice:

"Say, what're you going to do with the youngster…? How about I go to the rearguard…"

"Ah… No, don't worry about it."

At the Knight Commander's awkward concern, Alice shook her head with a smile.

"By chance, there are people among the volunteers who stayed with him in the Sword Mastery Academy… I'll leave him in their care once the battle begins."

"Heh, that's good…. Then, how did it go? Was there anything when the black-haired kid got into contact with people he'd conversed with before?"

Alice shook her head silently.

Bercouli exhaled shortly, mumbling "Like that, huh".

"…I'll only say this here. Honestly, I've always wondered whether the one who can really decide the tide of battle is actually that youngster…"

Alice looked up suddenly.

"Although he had the help of you, little girl, and his partner, being able to slash and kill Chudelkin and the Highest Minister is extremely impressive. If we just talk about the strength of his Incarnation, I'm afraid that not even I can compare."

"…How… can that be…?"

Alice already had not the slightest doubt of Kirito's strength, but Knight Commander Bercouli's had honed his Incarnation for more than two hundred years. Conversely, Kirito was still an underage student. It would be better to say that, regardless of swordsmanship or physique, it is impossible to win against the Knight Commander in terms of Incarnation willpower.

But Bercouli just refuted Alice with full confidence.

"Before, when we clashed with Incarnation, I felt it clearly. This kid has built up real combat skills on the same level as I have. Just like that."

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"Real combat…? What does that mean…?"

"What it sounds like. Putting your life on the line."

This was even more bizarre.

The people living in the Human Empire were protected, or restricted, by the Taboo Index or the numerous laws of various Empires; other than sparring with wooden swords, they usually would never have the chance to compete with real swords in their lifetimes.

The only exception was when the Integrity Knights carried out actual combat at the Mountain Range at the Edge with Goblins or Dark Knights attempting to invade. But since that was unlikely to happen even once or twice between very long spans of time, and since the Integrity Knights possessed crushing fighting power, they honestly hardly counted as life-threatening conflicts.

According to this, the one in the Human Empire with the most real combat experience would undoubtedly be Bercouli, who had fought the Dark Army when the Knighthood had been much smaller. In actuality, it is said that when he had just become an Integrity Knight — although hard to believe — he was pitifully defeated by a Dark Knight and barely escaped with his life.

Compared to the Bercouli then, Kirito has more real combat experience?

If that was true — it can't be experience from this world.

It was from his real home, «The Outside World». But that should also be the kingdom where the Gods who created the Underworld lived. It's clearly that, but there is combat there? And who exactly did he put his life on the line against?

Alice did not know what to think anymore; after hesitating briefly, she made up her mind.

By now, she could only come clean to Bercouli. The existence of the Outside World — and the***World End Altar*** that can connect to that place.

"… Oji-sama… Actually, when I was battling the Highest Minister…"

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Just as she was collecting her words, as they reached the tip of her tongue.

Suddenly, a sharp voice came from behind the Knight Commander.

"Your Excellency, it is time."

Alice turned her eyes to the owner of a voice that replied "Yes".

An Integrity Knight stood there, wrapped in light purple armor that was still dazzling at dusk, equipped with a silvery-white rapier on the left abdomen.

As soon as she saw the bird-of-prey-like winged helmet that completely obscured its owner's face, Alice felt a lament floating into her heart — directly speaking, it was an "Ahh" feeling.

To Alice, this was probably the person whom she could get along the least with. The Second Integrity Knight and Vice Knight Commander, Fanatio Synthesis Two.

Alice tried not to show her inner thoughts, and pressed her right fist to her left chest in a Knight's salute.

Across from her, Fanatio performed the same action, her armor clanking. But, different from Alice, who was standing straight with legs slightly apart, Fanatio shifted her center of gravity to her right leg and relaxed her left shoulder, putting on a delicate figure.

It's this part about this person that I just don't... Alice muttered silently as she dropped her hand.

She probably wanted to hide it with her armor, helmet and stern tone, but as soon as someone of the same gender saw her, Fanatio's unconcealable femininity would emanate from her words and actions like the fragrance of a huge flower. This was also a «Technique» that Alice, who was taken to the Cathedral at the age of a child, had not had the opportunity to appreciate.

When Vice Knight Commander Fanatio was battling Kirito and Eugeo on the fiftieth floor of the Cathedral, she suffered near-fatal injuries from a direct hit by Kirito's Armament Full Control Art. But according to lower Knights who happened to be at

the scene, Kirito had casted Healing Arts onto Fanatio, whom he had painstakingly defeated, and used a strange Art to transport her to some place, saving her life.

Although it sounded very much like what Kirito would do, Alice's heart was still not calm.

Besides, although this person has always said for a hundred years that she was loyal to Knight Commander Bercouli, she named four lower Knights who were smitten with her as her direct subordinates. Are they, who can only yearn but not touch, not pitiful? At least stop wearing a silver mask day and night and show your face to other people.

As Alice was muttering in her heart, Fanatio suddenly placed her hands on both sides of her helmet.

With a click, she unlocked the buckle and casually raised the equipment that shined with a light purple glow. Lustrous black hair billowed out, flowing in the night wind and emanating a silky gloss.

Alice had only seen Fanatio's face once, and it was a chance encounter while she was heading towards the Cathedral's baths. It seemed to be her first time seeing the Vice Knight Commander take off her helmet in plain sight of everyone.

As she stared at the beauty that seemed to be even gentler than before, she understood. Her soft lips shone with light lipstick. She, who always concealed her femininity until now, actually put on makeup—?

Fanatio smiled slightly at Alice, who stood blankly, and said:

"Long time no see, Alice ne. I'm relieved that you're so spirited wa."

"....."

Ne? Wa?[3]

Alice could not help but remain silent for a few seconds, then returned the greeting:

[3] Here, Fanatio greets Alice and ends her sentences in "ne" and "wa", Japanese modifiers that make the sentence feminine. Alice is surprised when Fanatio does this and repeats them in her head in disbelief. I couldn't find a good way to translate it to English, so I left it in the original Japanese.

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"Long… Long time no see, Vice Commander."

"Just call me Fanatio. Anyway, Alice. I only heard tell… You brought back that black-haired boy?"

At this sudden question, Alice immediately purged her mind of all surprise, her alertness rising at the same time.

Although the ones who healed Fanatio were Kirito and the sage Cardinal, she might not know that. To Kirito, who struck her down, it wouldn't be strange at all for her to harbor hatred and loathing.

"Y… Yes."

Hearing Alice's short reply, the Vice Commander nodded, maintaining her sweet smile.

"Oh really. Then, can I go and see him after the strategy meeting?"

"… What for, your Highness Fanatio?"

"Come on now, don't make that face. I've never wanted to cut that child."

Fanatio shrugged with a wry smile.

"I only want to thank him. After all, the one who healed my fatal injuries was that boy."

"… It is as you say. However, I think there is no need for you to thank Kirito. As I hear, the one who healed you was the Former Highest Minister, Cardinal. And that person… Most unfortunately, left this world in the battle half a year ago."

Alice said, slightly relaxing the tension in her shoulders. But Fanatio looked leisurely up at the sky, nodded softly and said:

"Yes… I vaguely remember. It was the first time I had experienced such a warm and powerful Healing Art. But the one who sent me to that Sage was Kirito, and… There's something else I want to thank him for."

"Something else…?"

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"Yes. —When he battled me and struck me down."

… As expected, she still wants to slash Kirito.

Seeing Alice take half a step back, Fanatio forcefully shook her head with a serious expression.

"I'm serious. That child is the only man who has seriously crossed swords with me even though he knew that I am female, in the two hundred years I have been an Integrity Knight."

"Hah…? What… are you…"

"In the past, I didn't wear this thick helmet and fought with my face shown, like you. But one day, I realized it. The male Knights who were my opponents in mock battles, even the Dark Knights whom I fought with my life, held back just a sliver in their swordsmanship. Showing mercy because I am a woman is a deeper humiliation to me than crawling on the ground after being defeated."

But that's just something that cannot be helped. Alice felt that that men who could ignore Fanatio's facial beauty did not exist.

After settling down in the outskirts of Rulid, she learned for the first time that, in the majority of the Human Empire, there were almost no Sacred Tasks that made women hold swords. At best, the exception were nobles and the children of Lords; in other words, ordinary female citizens were, in principle, unable to choose any method of survival other than becoming a wife, doing housework and raising sons and daughters.

If this ancient custom bound the hearts of the men like the Taboo Index, it would really be ironic. It's this existing prejudiced view that women should be protected by men that rendered many swords dull in front of Fanatio's striking beauty. Even the Dark Knights who were inhabitants of the Dark Territory were no exception. Of course, Goblins or Orcs who had a completely different appearance were another discussion altogether.

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But as a fellow female Knight, Alice had completely ignored the musings of male Knights until now. She was sure that, no matter if the enemy held back or pushed with full force, she would definitely be stronger than them.

— Your kind of rage is the proof that you are bound by your own identity as a female.

Just as Alice was silently talking to herself, Fanatio was muttering the same thing:

"— I used this helmet to hide my appearance and voice, and learned continuous sword techniques that kept enemies from nearing me. But this also means that I am too mired within my gender, right? That child saw through this immediately, but still fought me with all that he had. In my battle with him, I exhausted all of the sword and Art techniques that I knew, and eventually lost. I'm lucky for Cardinal's help that saved my life, and when I regained consciousness, all of the pointless bindings in my heart had disappeared… In other words, as long as I can be strong enough to prevent my opponent from having concerns, it'll be all right. It's not unreasonable that I want to thank the boy who helped me understand this simple truth, and saved my life, now is it?"

After saying this seriously, Fanatio suddenly smiled mischievously:

"Also… I'm a little annoyed. That boy actually said that he absolutely did not feel any femininity from my face. So I wanted to try and do *this* and *that* to see if I can wake that boy up."

"Wha…"

What the hell are you joking about?

If Kirito really woke up, then won't everything I've done up to today be completely worthless? Thinking from Kirito's angle, I really can't say that there's absolutely no possibility.

Without concealing the dangerous look between her eyebrows, Alice replied in a shrill voice:

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"Thank you very much for your kind words, but he is already resting now. I will pass on Your Highness Fanatio's feelings to him tomorrow."

"Ahh."

Losing her smile, the Vice Commander's long eyebrows twitched.

"I need your permission to see that child? In the Cathedral, when you requested to meet with His Excellency the Knight Commander while he was tending to public matters, I never declined because of my personal feelings."

"I don't need Your Highness Fanatio's permission to see Oji-sama, do I? Besides, aren't you supposed to see Oji-sama if you want to be pitifully defeated by a male Knight?"

"Ah, I'd rather not for His Excellency. He's the strongest swordsman in the world, and naturally he will hold back against everyone. Even if his opponent is a Dark Knight, he'll be merciful."

"Heh, really? When he trains with me, Oji-sama drips with sweat and is really serious."

"…Your Excellency! Is this true?!"

"Anyway, it's Oji-sama who pampers this person too much…!"

Alice and Fanatio turned to the side at the same time.

The Knight Commander was not there.

Where Bercouli was standing a few minutes ago, there was only the night wind that softly blew on the dry grass.

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Due to massive murderous intent released by acting chair Vice Knight Commander Fanatio Synthesis Two and Alice Synthesis Thirty who was newly joining the front, the strategy meeting held at six in the afternoon began with an unusually tense atmosphere.

After Alice briefly introduced herself, she fiercely sat down on the portable chair set in the very front row.

"...Alice-sama."

Sitting beside her, Eldrie quietly held out Siral Water. Alice grabbed the cup and downed the ice-cold, sour-sweet liquid. Exhaling deeply, she finally alleviated her mood.

—In any case.

There were really very few higher Integrity Knights with Divine Instruments. The only ones she knew the name and appearance of were the Knight Commander Bercouli of the «Time Piercing Sword», Fanatio of the «Heaven Piercing Sword», Eldrie of the «Frostscale Whip», and Deusolbert of the «Conflagrant Flame Bow».

Including Zayta Synthesis Twelve with the alias «Silent», and the extremely young Knight boy Lenry Synthesis Twenty-Seven who seemed to be a Divine Instrument possessor, since this was the first time Alice was seeing them, she didn't even know what kind of sword techniques they would use. No matter what, including the seven of the above and Alice of the «Fragrant Olive Sword», they constituted the higher Integrity Knights.

The remaining nine were lower Integrity Knights without Divine Instruments, including Fanatio's direct subordinates, the «Four Oscillation Blades». Within them were also the shadows of those two fearsome problem children, Trainee Knight girls who gave Bercouli endless headaches, Linel Synthesis Twenty-Eight and Fizel Synthesis Twenty-Nine. Although they were sitting quietly on chairs in a corner in front of them, will they really be useful?

No matter what, the mere sixteen people constituted the full force of what the Integrity Knighthood was able to put into this absolute line of defense.

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Conversely, the thirty Defense Army Commanders composed of ordinary citizens were present. Although they were not without vigor, at a glance it was still possible to see the difference between their swordsmanship and that of the Integrity Knights. Alice and the other higher Integrity Knights didn't need to be mentioned, but even the lower Integrity Knights could probably effortlessly win against all thirty of them at once…

"— In these four months, we have reviewed all tactics, but…"

Speaking again at some moment, Fanatio's voice brought Alice's attention back.

"What we can finally be sure of is that it would be very difficult to repel the enemy's total attack power with our own battle strength right now, and when we are surrounded by the enemy, there would be no odds anymore."

Using the thin scabbard of her Heaven Piercing Sword as a baton, Fanatio pointed at a giant map spread out in front of the troops.

"As you all can see, over here at the Mountain Range at the Edge, there are plains and rocky terrain spanning ten Kilol. If we are pushed back there, we would almost certainly be surrounded by the fifty-thousand-strong army and annihilated. Therefore, we must fight to the end in the hundreds-Mel wide, thousands-Mel long valley extending from the Great Eastern Gate. We shall set up a deep line formation here, focus on countering the enemy's assault, and slice them away bit by bit. That is the basic operation. Are there any comments regarding this point?"

The one who suddenly raised his hand was Eldrie. The young man stood up, his wisteria-colored curls shaking, as his usually casual but now suppressed rang in the air:

"If the enemy were only made up of Goblins or Orc foot soldiers, we could cut down even fifty or a hundred thousand. But the enemy are also very aware of this. The Dark Territory has within it an Ogre army equipped with strong crossbows, and a dangerous Dark Sorcerer division. How are we to counter their torrential long-range attacks soaring over from behind the foot soldiers?"

"About that, it's a dangerous bet…"

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Fanatio paused, turning her eyes from Eldrie to Alice. She inadvertently straightened her back and continued:

"… At the bottom of the valley, there is no sunlight even during the day, and the ground is devoid of vegetation. In other words, the Sacred Power in that space is very weak. Before the battle begins, if I and the others completely deplete that area, the enemy will be unable to invoke powerful incantations."

At Fanatio's bold suggestion, the Knights and Defense Army Commanders all began to argue.

"Of course, we're the same. However, we only have about a hundred Sacred Artists on our side anyway. If we battle with Arts, the enemy's Sacred Power expenditure would far exceed our own."

That is true. However —there were two problems with Fanatio's operation.

In place of Eldrie, who was now speechless, the archer Deusolbert stood up. The veteran knight clad in reddish-copper armor inquired in a steady voice:

"So, perhaps the Her Highness the Vice Commander's words are true. However, Sacred Arts are certainly not just for attack purposes. If the Sacred Power is exhausted, won't we be unable to recover the Life of injured victims?"

"That's why I said it's a dangerous bet. We have emptied the Cathedral treasury of all advanced catalysts[4] and healing medicines stored there and transported them here. If we restrict all Arts to Healing Arts and supplement them with medicines, we should be able to hold the fort for two days just with catalysts… No, three days."

This time there was even more surprised hustle and bustle. When the treasury of the Central Cathedral was mentioned, most people knew of a guarding force secure enough to become the subject of a fairy tale. They had only heard of treasures being moved inside; it was the first time in Human Empire history that they heard of bringing something out.

[4] "Catalysts" in the Underworld refer to crafted substances that supplement Sacred Power. They are made from the dried ball-shaped fruits born from wilted flowers and produce Sacred Power in the form of green light once crushed by the caster's fingers. For more info, please see Volume 10, Chapter 4.

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Even the serious faces of the heroic Knights displayed silently shocked expressions. Waiting until Deusolbert sat down with a moan, Alice stood up.

"There's still… one problem, Your Highness Fanatio."

Clearing her mind of their argument a while ago, Alice brought up the second problem.

"Although Solus and Terraria's grace are thin, the valley is not completely dark, and moreover, it is not completely separated from the mainland. I believe that over the years, it has accumulated a massive amount of Sacred Power. Exactly who can completely deplete that power in the time before the battle begins?"

This time, even Fanatio was unable to give an immediate reply.

The valley that ran through the mountains was certainly narrower than the grassy plain that extended behind the camp, but even so, it was a hundred Mel wide and a thousand Mel long. To immediately drain that expansive space of the Sacred Power that covered it, hundreds of Artists must cast advanced Arts at the same time, but it was as Fanatio just said: there were not that many Artists in the Defense Army.

Or, even if they numbered few, as long as they could drive an extreme-scale Art enough to change the environment, they might be able to completely expend the Sacred Power, but Alice couldn't think of any people with that kind of power except the deceased Highest Minister Administrator and the sage Cardinal.

However, the Vice Commander gazed at Alice with golden-brown eyes and shook her head forcefully.

"No, there is. Only one person can do it."

"…… One person…?"

Mumbling softly, Alice looked around at the Defense Army soldiers.

But what came out of Fanatio's mouth was a name she had never considered.

"That's you, Alice Synthesis Thirty."

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"EH…?!"

"You may not have noticed, but your strength now has exceeded the scope of an Integrity Knight. If it's the current you, you should be able to use it… that world-creating, veritable godlike power."

7

"Are these 'higher Integrity Knights' really that strong?"

Gabriel Miller asked during a bumpy ride inside of a gigantic tank dragged by a dinosaur-like two-headed monstrosity. However, this "tank" was more similar to a box on four wheels without treads or a turret.

The silk-covered bench softened shaking somewhat but did not suppress it entirely. Still, in comparison to the nightmarish roller coaster Gabriel had to experience in the military vehicle known as a "Bradley"[5], this ride was nothing. Wine rippled regularly in a glass that stood on a folding table in front of him.

Three days have already passed since they left Obsidia, but even though Gabriel had never experienced continuous movement for this long in the real world, he was almost completely unfatigued. This was most likely unrelated to the pleasure of sitting in this so-called tank and actually because this was a virtual world.

Besides Gabriel's feet, lying on a soft carpet, the beautiful woman in unkempt clothing massaged her bandaged right leg and nodded.

"They are very strong indeed… In nearly three hundred years of combat history, not a single one of our Dark Sorcerers or Dark Knights has managed to kill one… I don't know if you can understand this kind of example? Of course, the opposite has happened countless times, as many times as there are stars in the sky."

"Hm…"

[5] Bradley Fighting Vehicle, an American armored vehicle manufactured by BAE Systems Land and Armaments.

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In place of Gabriel who fell silent, Vassago, who was sitting on the opposite side with his legs crossed holding a bottle of distilled wine, asked in a half-suspicious voice:

"But listen, D, baby. If those weirdly named bunch of Integrity… Knights are really that awesome, how come they never invaded us themselves?

The leader of the Dark Arts guild, DIL, smiled seductively and raised her index finger.

"Good question, Vassago-sama. Each of them does have the strength of a thousand, but in the end, each of them is just one person. If this warrior would be surrounded by ten thousand fighters in an open space, he'd start to incur wounds, those wounds would accumulate and eventually his entire Life would deplete. That's why these cowards never go too far over the Mountain Range at the Edge. They are afraid of being surrounded."

"Heh, I see. It's like how you can take care of all of those tough ***mobs*** even if your ***DoT***[6] is very low but you stay in a safe place and shave away their HP bit by bit…"

"Hah?… ***Mobs***?…"

Gabriel glared at Vassago, who had completely confused D's artificial Fluctlight with his comparison, coughed lightly and said:

"Anyway, you're saying that if we force these Integrity Knights to fight us in an open space, we'll be able to surround and exterminate them, correct?"

"That's how it is in theory. But we'll probably have to sacrifice tens of thousands of Goblins and Orcs."

Giggling, D picked a brightly colored berry out of the cup on the carpet and licked it with her lips that were just as crimson red.

Needless to say, Gabriel was completely indifferent to the loss of infantry units. He would not care if he had to sacrifice the entire army, including even D. In a sense,

[6] DoT = Damage over Time, video game term referring to damage on a character that is distributed over a period of time, usually until the character obtains help or dies.

this battle was the same as the tactical simulations he went through countless times back at GlowGen.

He will become the new ruler of the Human Empire with his throne on a mountain of corpses, and issue a simple order across the entire country: find and bring him the girl known as Alice. After that, his mission in this strange world would be finished.

As he thought, the exotic high-class wine in the glass became increasingly precious.

Raising his glass, Gabriel sipped the dark purple liquid.

At this time, Gabriel Miller's mind unconsciously molded together the figure of «Alice», with the flawless, beautiful figure of his first prey that had an extremely similar name, Alicia Clingerman. Living in some place that would be similar to his home, Pacific Palisades, she would be gentle, beautiful —and absolutely powerless. That was the image in his head.

That was why Gabriel failed to consider another possibility.

He did not even begin to imagine —that the «Alice» he sought would be one of the Integrity Knights leading the enemy army.

A long military convoy, with the command car with a waving Emperor flag bringing up the rear, was slowly but surely moving to the West. At the edge of the blood-colored sky, the saw-like pitch-black Mountain Range at the Edge slowly revealed its silhouette.

On the fourth day of the march, the seventh day of the eleventh month.

The main forces of the Dark Territory approached the base of the Mountain Range, where they could see the huge gate that was just about to collapse. A countless number of black tents set up by the vanguard covered the wide plain.

Boom.

Boom.

The earth trembled from the thunderous war drums played by the tribe of Giants.

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At the end of the line, Gabriel looked silently from the roof of his command car — as though they were countless blood cells pumped by a giant heart, the attack unit slowly expanded into the final formation.

The first vanguard unit consisted of several light infantry regiments composed of Goblins and heavy Orc infantry, numbering fifteen thousand overall. They lined up in a column barely the same width as that of the valley piercing through the Mountain Range. Here and there among the formation, Giants resembling siege towers were stationed; they numbered less than five hundred, but as the main force tanks supporting the infantry unit, they were worth it.

Behind the Mixed Demihuman Unit, there was the second line, comprised of five thousand Fist Fighters and five thousand Dark Knights. The young new leader of the Dark Knights wanted to wash away the shame of his predecessor and asked to be part of the vanguard, but Gabriel refused. That could cause a drop in morale of the other Knight Units and he must eliminate such this unsure factor.

The third line was built up of seven thousand Ogre Archers and an entirely female Dark Sorceress division that numbered three thousand. Their task was to charge into the valley behind the infantry and annihilate the enemy army with long range attacks. According to the head of the Sorceresses, D, even if they used long-range attacks, if they could recognize the main force of the enemy army — the shadows of the Integrity Knights, they could kill them with by concentrating their fire onto one point.

Honestly, Gabriel really wanted to take on those invincible Knights by himself and consume their souls. However, any sort of accident could result in his high-level account being lost. Besides, he could create as many Underworldians — that is, artificial Fluctlights, as he wanted in the future. Right now, the primary goal was to control «Alice» and escape the «Ocean Turtle».

From logging to now, eight days of internal time had passed, which corresponded to about fifteen minutes in the real world. After Gabriel assumed complete control of the Human Empire, the amount of time it would take to spread the order to find Alice to each corner of this world would take about ten more days. Thinking like that, he must end this war as quickly as possible — the longest being an entire day.

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"Ahh, we're not gonna get any action after all?"

Vassago complained from behind, clutching his umpteenth bottle of whiskey. Gabriel threw a quick look at him and reprimanded him with a sharp tone:

"Don't think I didn't see you. When that Knight called Shasta caused trouble, you hung me out to dry and ran off."

"Heh, our commander sees everything, doesn't he?"

Vassago ostentatiously laughed it off.

"Look, I specialize in ***PvP***. I didn't sign up to deal with that disembodied monster."

Gazing into his subordinate's eyes, Gabriel still failed to understand whether his explanation was a joke or not, so he asked curtly:

"Vassago, why did you volunteer to participate in this operation?"

"Operation? You mean Diving into the Underworld? Isn't that obvious? It's fun…"

"Before that. The operation of attacking the «Ocean Turtle». Although you are part of GlowGen DS support, you're probably still just an internet expert. What is your motive for participating in a real fight, risking being hit by real bullets? At your age, you're not like Hans and Brigg, the ***war dogs*** who came back from the Middle East.

It was quite a long question for Gabriel, but it did not mean that he was interested in this person called Vassago Casals. It just suddenly seemed as if this young man was hiding something under his shallow behavior.

Vassago shrugged and replied with the same answer.

"Isn't that obvious? It's fun… That's it, I swear."

"Heh…"

"Then according to your logic, sending college elites like you to the scene is weirder, whether or not you have any real military experience."

"I am capable of adapting to my environment."

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Gabriel replied, but internally he muttered:

Vassago, what is "fun" to you? Shooting guns? Or… murdering people?

Just as Gabriel was hesitating over whether to continue to question Vassago or end the small talk, the sound of clicking high-heels, resembling that of a walking stick, came from behind the command car. A beautiful woman revealing light dark skin — Dark Sorcerer Commander D appeared.

After a respectful bow, she licked her lips and reported:

"Your Majesty, the forces have been successfully brought into their positions."

"Mm."

Gabriel spread his crossed legs, stood up from his temporary throne and looked around.

There were thirty-five thousand warriors in the main force, a ten-thousand-strong backup force built up of Goblins and Orcs, and the command car, flanked on both sides by a five thousand-strong supply unit of the Commerce Guild.

This fifty-thousand person army was Gabriel's entire force. If he suffered heavy losses and was still unable to break through the enemy's defenses, he would be unable to correct his basic plan. The chances of securing Alice would almost completely disappear.

However, according to reports from Dragon Knight Scouts, the enemy had merely three thousand. If everything went according to plan and he could take out the Integrity Knights, it would be impossible to lose.

"… All right, good job. How much time is left until the gate collapses?"

"About eight hours."

"Then, have the first division enter the valley an hour before the gate collapses. Fan them out as close to the gate as possible, and attack the very moment it falls. If they can push back the front, immediately send in the second and third division and annihilate the enemy in a single strike."

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"Yes. …We will take the head of the enemy before tomorrow. Of course, they will already have been charred beyond recognition."

D giggled. After quickly giving orders to the Sorceresses awaiting them behind her, she bowed deeply and descended the steps.

Gabriel walked to the front of his huge four-wheeled vehicle, looking far off at the gigantic stone gate erected in front of him.

It was still two miles off, but its size gave off the tension of a huge mountain. Seeing an object of that quality collapse would be an astounding phenomenon.

However, the true feast will have only just begun. The thousands of souls that will crack and disappear will release an unparalleled gorgeous glow. The RATH technicians locked up on the top floor of the «Ocean Turtle» will regret missing this most grandiose scene that they established themselves.

Boom. Boom.

Boom. Boom.

The drums were beat increasingly faster, arousing a hunger and madness that flooded the wilderness.

8

"Then… Please take care of Kirito."

Alice said, gazing at each of the two girls' faces.

Novice trainees, no, already independent swordswomen Tiese Shtolienen and Ronye Arabel straightened their backs and nodded forcefully.

"Yes, please rest assured and leave it to us, Alice-sama."

"We will definitely protect Kirito-senpai."

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Replying to Alice, Tiese and Ronye gripped the newly constructed wheelchair's handle with their left and right hand respectively.

Alice had used an Art to transform an extra full set of armor from the supply tent into the thin, long chair that reflected a grayish-white glow. It was not only lighter than the wooden wheelchair they had used in Rulid, it was guaranteed to be durable.

Even so, she could not do anything about the weight of the two swords that Kirito clutched onto. Alice worried in her heart over whether the girls could push them or not, but the duo inhaled and exhaled in collaboration, pushing the wheelchair straight in front of Alice.

This way, they would not be delayed even if they received an emergency retreat order. Even so, when the time came that they could not help but escape from the valley, it would also be the time when the Defense Army would be surrounded and destroyed.

In honesty, as soon as the battle took a turn slightly for the worse, Alice would take Kirito and flee towards the east. But it would only be delaying their fate by a few months — no, just a few weeks.

If the Defense Army was defeated, the four Knights protecting the Mountain Range at the Edge would also retreat, ordering citizens from each village and city to evacuate, and set up the city wall of Central Capital Centoria as the last line of defense. But that would only be pointless resistance. Eventually to be ravaged by the invading army, that beautiful city and its white Cathedral would be burned down. Within the wall-like, now sealed Mountain Range at the Edge, they would have absolutely nowhere to run…

Alice bent her knees down to Kirito's height and gazed into his eyes.

In the five days since they arrived at the camp, whenever she had time, Alice would speak to Kirito, caress his hands, and hug him tight and close. But, up to today, he still failed to produce any response that was worth mentioning.

"Kirito… Perhaps, this is our last farewell."

Alice murmured to the black-haired youth, trying to keep her smile.

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"Oji-sama said that he feels you can decide the outcome of this battle. I feel the same way, since this Defense Army was set up because of you."

In actuality, if it were not for Kirito and Eugeo, the ones embattling the Great Eastern Gate would be the Highest Minister Administrator and the entire Integrity Knighthood, and that ominous Sword Golem army.

If they had two to three thousand Sword Golems, known for their chilling fighting strength, the fifty thousand-strong Dark Territory army would indeed be not worth mentioning. But that would also mean the destruction of the Human Empire. Kirito and the others sacrificed a life and a heart to prevent that tragedy.

But if this continues and the Defense Army is defeated, a different kind of heavy tragedy would bear down upon and attack the people.

"… I will also try my best. I will burn and exhaust this Life you bestowed upon me to its very last drop. So… If I fall and use my last bit of strength to call upon you, you must stand up and draw that sword. As long as you can wake up, it wouldn't matter if the enemy numbered thousands or tens of thousands. Evoke a miracle again, and protect the Human Empire… everyone. Because, you are…"

—The one who defeated even the Highest Minister, the strongest swordsman.

Silently murmuring in her heart, Alice extended both hands and tightly hugged Kirito's emaciated frame.

After some time, Alice released the embrace, stood up, and noticed Ronye's blue eyes, shaking with a complicated radiance, turned firmly towards them. *Why would this be?* She blinked a few times, and suddenly understood.

"Ronye-san. You… like Kirito, don't you?"

After Alice said that with a smile, the delicate girl covered her mouth with her hands, her face reddening ear to ear. She looked down and replied in a feeble voice:

"No, it's not, how can… How could I be so disrespectful…? Someone like me, I'm only a novice trainee valet…"

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"What do you mean, disrespectful? Ronye-san, you're the successor of a noble family, aren't you? I'm just a civilian born in a border town, and even Kirito is a moneyless, incapable, unemployed person with an unknown birthplace…"

Suddenly, Ronye shook her head vehemently and interrupted Alice.

"No! I… I…"

With her left hand, Tiese gently supported Ronye, whose eyes were filling with tears and had stopped her words abruptly. Her reddish-leafy colored eyes also dampened as she began in a trembling voice:

"Alice-sama… You know of the Taboo that Kirito-senpai and Eugeo-senpai broke, right?"

"Yeah… I know. I heard that there was a conflict within the Academy… They murdered other students."

Half a year ago, when Alice, still oblivious as an Axiom Church elite soldier, received the Senate's order for arrest, she still remembered today the slight shock she felt then. There were never any records of that kind of major Taboo violation involving Central Capital Academy students murdering other students in the Church's historical records.

"Then… Do you know why the Senpais broke the Taboo…?"

"No… About that, I…"

Just as Alice was about to shake her head, a wave of shouts resounded in her head.

That was what Kirito shouted at Alice, who did not need the help of a convict, when they were both thrown to the outer wall of the Cathedral…

"—As long as it's not prohibited by the Taboo Index, it's tolerable for completely innocent girls like Tiese and Ronye to be freely played around with by the Upper Elite… Do you think this way!!?"

Right. I heard the names of these two then.

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Elite students should be the students that Kirito cut down. Then, the ones who were played with, are—

To Alice, whose eyes opened wide, Tiese described in a quaking voice:

"... Elite Swordsman-in-Training Raios Antinous and Elite Swordsman-in-Training Humbert Zizek repeatedly issued humiliating orders to our friend and Novice Trainee Frenica Szeski. We raised objections to those two Swordsmen-in-Training and in our anger, carelessly used language equivalent to extremely disrespectful behavior. Because of that, according to Empire Fundamental Law, the noble class were able to exercise their right to punishment and reward..."

After that, just thinking about it would be extremely painful. Tiese's voice had already became stuck, and Ronye began to sob softly, her head lowered.

Just as Alice was about to open her mouth and utter "You don't have to say anymore", the red-haired girl continued determinately:

"... To save us, who were dealt with unbearable punishment, Kirito-senpai and Eugeo-senpai swung their swords. If we had been a little more intelligent, that would not have happened. Our Senpais would not have fought against the Church to correct the law, and would not have perished because of that. We... have committed an unforgivable sin. Therefore... even if our mouths were ripped to shreds, we could not say that we like our Senpais..."

After sputtering out her heartfelt thoughts, hot tears finally streamed down Tiese's face. Carrying hatred and humiliation too harsh for their age, the young girls hugged each other, whimpering softly.

Alice tightly clenched her teeth, looking up at the small skylight.

She also knew of the corruption of the Upper Noble Class of the Four Empires. Satiation, extortion, and adultery.

But the Integrity Knight Alice from before believed that dwelling on these acts would cause herself to be contaminated, so she turned a blind eye to the noble class's misbehavior. No matter what they did, as long as they did not break the Taboo Index,

they could be ignored — As to why, it was because she was a Protector of the Law summoned from the Spirit World. And she always deeply believed that.

But this kind of ignorance was the real sin. Not touching the Taboo Index that Kirito hated deeply was the actual major crime. Compared to her inactive self, the two girls in front of her were many times braver.

Alice inhaled and exhaled deeply, and said in a voice imbibed with strength:

"No, you're wrong. You both have done nothing wrong."

The one who raised her head, shocked, was Ronye. The girl who seemed to always hide behind Tiese stared with eyes tangled with intense light and shouted:

"Alice-sama… Honorable Integrity Knight Alice-sama cannot understand! Our bodies were played with those men, and our self-respect has been tarnished!"

"The body is but a container for the spirit."

Replying like that, Alice forcefully thumped the center of her chest with her right fist.

"Only your heart… Only your spirit is the one true existence. And the one who decides the state of your spirit, is yourself."

Alice closed her eyes and gathered her consciousness within herself.

When Rulid was attacked about two weeks ago, Alice once used the power of the heart —- that is, Incarnation, to recover her lost right eye. She personally felt that as long as she firmly, carefully prayed, she could induce changes in her physical body even without relying on Arts.

But now that was still not enough. Not just her physical body, even the clothes on her body must be changed by the power of Incarnation.

It is definitely possible. Didn't Kirito do it before? He, who confronted Administrator holding two swords, flipped up an exotic, long black leather coat completely different from the clothes he wore up until now.

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She can change back. She can change back to the Alice when she awoke in that huge, unfamiliar tower, before she blindly sealed her heart away with thick icy armor to eliminate the anxiety and loneliness from losing her memories.

—I'm the same as both of you, Ronye, Tiese. I was born as the child of a man, made many mistakes, bore deep sins, and now am here. If Eugeo killed someone because of you… Before now, if I had not broken that small Taboo when I was younger nine years ago, then Eugeo and the others would not have headed for the Central Capital at all.

Yes, that was my crime. Even if I have no memories of her, Alice Schuberg is not an unfamiliar stranger, but definitely me from before. The days I spent in Rulid taught me that much.

Even as her eyes were closed, Alice was still aware of the white, warm glow that wrapped around her body.

Alice slowly opened her eyes.

Because her head was lowered, the first thing she saw was the dress she was wearing. But that was not pure white, the color of the Axiom Church, but dyed azure blue, reminiscent of an autumn sky.

A plain white apron lay on top of her skirt. The golden armor and gauntlets had disappeared. As she felt the top of her head, her fingertips touched a large ribbon. Her hair also seemed to be slightly shorter.

Raising her head, she met eyes with the shocked Ronye and Tiese.

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"...See, right? The body and appearance are merely dependencies of the heart."

Of course, this transformation was temporary. The instant that concentration was broken, she should turn back into her original Knight form. But the meaning behind it should be able to be conveyed to the girls. Alice's, Kirito's and Eugeo's longing.

"Your heart cannot be tarnished by anyone. Born in a border village, I was originally supposed to be raised this[7] way. But when I was eleven years old, I was taken to the Central Capital as a sinner, had my memories erased using Arts and turned into an Integrity Knight, and I have cursed that fate before..."

Alice was recounting a great secret that only Knight Commander Bercouli knew apart from herself. But she believed that these two people would be able to accept it, and continued:

"However... Even in that state, there are things I am able to accomplish and things I am supposed to accomplish; that's what Kirito taught me. Therefore, I am no longer confused. I have decided to accept myself and step forward."

Alice raised both hands and firmly grasped Ronye and Tiese's hands.

"You have them too. A wide, long, and straight path belonging only to you."

Several droplets landed onto the tightly clasped hands, dripping and dripping.

The tears that slid down the girls' faces took on a spectral glow completely unlike before, shining beautifully.

Tightly embracing Kirito in the wheelchair again, Alice entrusted him to Ronye and Tiese, and walked out of the tent.

Although he was intentionally waiting for her, Eldrie jogged over, full of praise:

"Ohh, how outstanding... A form resembling that of the Solus's condensed light... This is my real mentor Alice-sama..."

"I will be covered with dust after an hour of battle anyway."

[7] Alice is referring to her transformed figure. Here, "this way" means the way she could have been raised had she not been taken to Centoria.

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Coldly interrupting his words, Alice looked towards the eastern sky.

Her transformation before had long disappeared; her golden breastplate and pure white skirt blindingly reflected the sunlight. As she gazed up towards the eastern sky, she thought that if she came back alive, she would add a piece of sky-blue cloth somewhere.

Solus was already leaning downwards. There were about three more hours before it would vanish into the horizon. And then, the Life of the Great Eastern Gate would also vanish. Finally, the three hundred-year-old seal was about to be released.

The personnel were already at their limit.

In these five days, Alice trained along with the Defense Army; their proficiency made it difficult to believe that they had only trained for half a year. What was more surprising was that everyone mastered combination sword skills completely absent from traditional schools of teaching.

Alice heard that it was Vice Knight Commander Fanatio who generously imparted her skills honed over many years. The longest one seemed to be only a three-hit attack, but it was an encouraging weapon against the Goblins or Orcs, who randomly brandished their rough blades according to their instinct.

Of course, if they ran into Dark Knights with their own continuous-hit skills, it would be a very heavy burden for the Defense Army soldiers. If high-speed continuous-hit Fist Fighters were added to the mix, they could only count on the Integrity Knights to counter them.

The important matter was whether they could defend against the great army of Demihumans that would immediately swarm in once the battle began. Also, whether they could survive the bows of the Orcs and long-range attack Arts while sustaining as little losses as possible.

Whether they succeeded or not, it now seemed that everything rested on Alice's shoulders—

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Turning her eyes back forward, she saw the rear supply team preparing their last supper, with a few columns of smoke curling upwards. Not far away, Ronye and Tiese should be taking Kirito towards there to meet everyone else.

Must protect it. No matter what.

"… Alice-sama, it is time…"

Nodding at Eldrie's words, Alice turned around stepped forward.

But she stopped her feet at that moment, throwing her eyes towards her only disciple.

"… M-May I ask what is the matter?"

Staring at the young Knight who blinked confusedly, Alice slightly relaxed her taut lips.

"… All this time, you've done your best to serve me, Eldrie."

"Hah… W-what's wrong?!"

She softly laid her right hand onto the left hand of the dumbfounded standing Knight and continued:

"To be able to have you by my side is a kind of redemption for me. You did not seek the teachings of veteran Knights such as Deusolbert, but found me, who had not many achievements… You were actually thinking for the sake of my heart, were you not?"

"I… I do not dare, there are no such disrespectful delusions within me! I am merely reverent of Alice-sama's outstanding swordsmanship from the bottom of my heart…"

Eldrie denied, shaking his head frantically. Alice instantly firmly grasped his hand, let go, and smiled again:

"Because you were there to support me, I am able to finish walking this dangerous path today. Thank you, Eldrie.

From the speechless young Knight's eyes, fat tears suddenly gushed out.

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"..... Alice-sama... Why... do you say that you are finished walking..."

His raspy voice asked:

"Why must you say it like your path is going to end here? I... I... haven't learnt anything yet. No matter in swords, or in Arts, I am still nothing compared to you. From now on, I still need you to always, always train, and guide me...!"

In the instant before his trembling outstretched right hand touched her own—

Alice suddenly changed her attitude and scolded sharply:

"Integrity Knight Synthesis Thirty-One!"

"Here... Here."

His hand immediately halting, the Knight straightened into an upright, unmoving posture.

"In the name of your mentor, I hereby give you your last order. Please live on. Live to witness the coming of peace, and bring it back. Bring back your real life, and your loved one."

On the uppermost floor of the Cathedral, there were still sealed the «Memory Fragments» of all the other Integrity Knights apart from Alice, as well as the «Loved One» who had transformed into a sword. There must be a way for them to return to their original place and the form they once were.

Eldrie stood upright, tears silently pouring out, and nodded forcefully; Alice fiercely turned around. Her golden hair and pure white skirt sliced the icy autumn air.

The visible valley and Great Eastern Gate in the darkness were straight in front of her sight.

From then on, Alice will begin chanting an extreme scale Sacred Art she had never experienced in her life. Without leaving a single drop, she will condense together all Sacred Space Power, provided without Solus, to deal a crippling blow to the enemy.

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If she makes a single error in the words of her incantation — No, if there is a single sliver of disorder in her concentration, the condensed Sacred Power will erupt and completely obliterate Alice's existence without leaving a trace.

But she had no more fear. In these five days, as an Integrity Knight, Alice spent an enriching time with Bercouli, Fanatio, Eldrie and the others, and as Alice of Rulid, she lived together with her little sister Selka for a half year.

And the most important thing was, she met Eugeo and Kirito, clashed swords with them, touched each other's hearts, and understood the emotions of being human — sorrow, rage, and love.

Other from that, what more was there to desire?

Along with sharp sound of her armor, Alice walked step by step in a straight line through the center of the Defense Army that waited for the moment of battle.

(To be continued)

Afterword

Hello everyone, I'm Kawahara. Now I am writing this chapter of content in a violently anxious mood. The reason is that I went under the condition of forgetting to write an afterword for several days!

Ah— Now, back to business. Thank you everyone for reading «Sword Art Online 15: Alicization Invading>>.

In the last book «Uniting», the big boss of the Church, the Highest Minister Administrator, was defeated, but "to be continued" was written at the end for some reason, so exactly what happened next— is what happened now... Our story left the cage of the Human Empire and moved to the boundless Dark Territory. The Ocean Turtle that Asuna and the others in the real world are in also suffered an attack, and Kikuoka changed from his bathrobe to a Hawaiian shirt and various developments like that...

Under these circumstances, the next book is finally planned to begin the war between the Human Empire Defense Army and the Dark Territory. The Alicization chapter that began with Volume 9 has gradually entered its climax; everyone, please continue to look after me in the future!

Regarding personal happenings, I, along with my illustrator abec-san, attended America's largest anime convention «Anime Expo» as guests together. Although it was my first time in Los Angeles (only my second time traveling to America, so to speak), the city and convention center were huge! Also, the enthusiasm from anime fans from all over America that covered the entire convention center was really surprising!

Of course, thank you very much to the all of the SAO enthusiasts who were able to come. At the same time, I realized again everyone's supportive kindness in the ten years since the work that was going to be named SAO was brought up to today, from the web era to Dengeki Bunko, and anime adaptations and game adaptations.

By the time this book is published, the airing of the second season of the television anime should have already begun. Paralleling with the first season, it has the «World

Afterword

of Guns» as its stage, but from Supervising to all of the workers and voice actors, everyone will fully show the style of gunfights, and the characteristics of SAO, which remain unchanged despite this circumstance. I again ask everyone to please support the anime version.

Time's just about up so I'll make my words of gratitude simple! abec-san, who displayed the charm of new characters constantly taking the stage in this volume, Miki-san, who came to LA with me as my editor, Tsuchiya-san, who took on the role of a guard and served as deputy editor in Japan while we were away, and everyone who has read to this point, thank you very much!

A certain day in July 2014, Reki Kawahara

Credits:

Translation – defan752, Tap

Terminology – Tap

Proofreading – DarthMewtwo, CJ

Japanese Version Parallel – CJ

Compiled - BlackHeart